

Sunday January 15th, 2023

Luke 16:19-31
“Who Are You Stepping Over?”

There was a certain old recluse who lived deep in the mountains of Colorado. When he died, distant relatives came from the city to collect his valuables. Upon arriving, all they saw was an old shack with an outhouse beside it. Inside the shack, next to the rock fireplace, was an old cooking pot, and his mining equipment. A cracked table with a three-legged chair stood guard by a tiny window, and a kerosene lamp served as the centerpiece for the table. In a dark corner of the little room was a dilapidated cot with a threadbare bedroll on it.

They picked up some of the old relics and started to leave. As they were driving away, an old friend of the recluse, on his mule, flagged them down. “Do you mind if I help myself to what’s left in my friend’s cabin?” he asked. “Go right ahead,” they replied. After all, they thought, what inside that shack could be worth anything?

The old friend entered the shack and walked directly over to the table. He reached under it and lifted one of the floor boards. He then proceeded to take out all the gold his friend had discovered over the past 53 years – enough to have built a palace. The recluse died with only his friend knowing his true worth. As the friend looked out of the little window and watched the cloud of dust behind the relative’s car disappear, he said, “They should have got to know him better.

Back when I was a teenager in a church youth group, we once tried what I will call an exercise in trust. Each of us took a turn, facing away from the group. The person whose turn it was would fall backward, expecting to be caught by the others. Taking this fall was not easy. Some of us could not let go for more than a few inches before stopping ourselves. There was a lot of laughter, and feelings of embarrassment.

I was reminded of this exercise in trust from something I read from the author, Mitch Albom, who recalls an unusual class from his college days. The professor has the students participate in that very same trust exercise. There too, the result is hesitation, embarrassment, and laughter.

One student redeems the situation. A thin, quiet, dark-haired girl who almost always wears bulky white fisherman sweaters, she crosses her arms across the chest, closes her eyes, leans back, and does not flinch. For a moment it looks as though she is going to thump on the floor. At the last instant, her assigned partner garbs her head and shoulders and yanks her up harshly. “Whoa!” several students yell. Some clap. The professor points out that the girl closing her eyes is what made the difference. [Mitch Albom, “Tuesdays with Morrie” (Doubleday, 1997), pp. 60-61.]

Another example of the trust exercise appears in a story Jesus tells. Two people fall backward. One is unable to trust, and cannot be caught. The other one closes his eyes, falls backward, and is caught by the one behind him. The trustful one we know as Lazarus. This because Jesus names the one and only person in any of his parables. Jesus does not give a name to the other man, but refers to him simply as “the rich man.” Christian tradition labels him as Dives, the Latin word for rich man; let us do the same.

Sunday January 15th, 2023

You can imagine the life that Dives enjoys. Dives dresses up in fancy clothes, and eats well, one day after another. He's quite a consumer, and he wants for nothing. So preoccupied is he, in fact, that he simply does not notice or simply ignores, poor, sick Lazarus lying outside his front door. Lying there on his manicured lawn. Dives' pet dogs find their way to Lazarus, they lick the poor man's sores, but Dives does not notice his neighbor in need. Oh, he may see the figure of Lazarus and even know his name, but all to no avail; he fails truly to recognize him.

It is very important that we recognize that Dives does not oppress Lazarus, or cheat him, or exploits him; he simply does not notice him or ignores him. In time according to Jesus, Dives dies. Perhaps his death is premature, due to all that rich food, and the ignoring of his doctor's advice. His funeral was probably quite a big deal, and his burial plot looks beautiful. But Dives finds himself in a place of torment. He complains that this place is hotter than hell, and then suddenly realizes, much to his astonishment, that it is hell.

Dives looks around. There in the distance, very far away from him, well beyond the boundaries of torment, he sees the brilliant figure of Abraham, and somebody sitting beside him. Certainly, to chat with Abraham is of the prized seats for the departed. The face of that other figure, looks familiar. Then Dives recognizes that this is the poor homeless man who once sprawled over his lawn, and was such a nuisance for the dogs.

Dives has lost nothing of his haughtiness. He hails Abraham as one might signal a less-than-competent waiter. "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to cool my tongue with a damp fingertip; these flames are frightfully uncomfortable." Same old Dives. Absorbed with himself. He thinks he deserves this special treatment, and that Lazarus is available to serve as his personal lackey.

The answer is "no," but Abraham gives it to him easy. First, the universe does, however slowly, bend toward justice. Dives' whole life was a holiday; Lazarus, on the other hand, had it lousy. The death of both of them brought about a great reversal. Now it's Lazarus' turn to sit at poolside enjoying a drink with the big boys, while Dives is doomed to sizzle like fat in the frying pan.

Second, Abraham points out that where he is, and where Dives is, are separated by a great gulf, an insurmountable no-man's land. This probably represents the chasm in Dives heart. So, Abraham finds himself unable to have room service visit Dives. That's just the way it is. Dives is not in the habit of taking "no" for an answer. So, he makes another request, one where he sounds like a good family man. "Then I beg you to send Lazarus to my father's house, and warn my five brothers to clean up their act; otherwise, all six of us will sizzle together."

Abraham replies that the brothers can get on the right track if they read and heed the Bible. Dives counters with a suggestion, a plea, and an original idea. He knows his brothers. The whole lot of them are a sad sight when it comes to ethics, religion, or just plain decency. But if someone were to come back from the dead—heart thumping again inside the shroud—then even those morally challenged, self-indulgent boneheads would sit up and take notice.

Once again what Dives proposes is shot down by Abraham.

Sunday January 15th, 2023

The old patriarch responds: “You’ve missed the point by a mile. This resurrection business is not about reviving corpses so they’re good for another 100,000 miles. This kingdom of God is not the old life you remember, great meals and fine tailoring, but done in more brilliant colors. If we send Lazarus off to your brothers, he’ll startle them, but their hearts won’t change. They’ll still play by the same crooked rules, and they’ll assume the game goes on forever.

“Try to understand, Dives: What we’re about here is a whole new order, and strange to say, it works through failure, loss, and death. Nobody struts their way in. To enter you must fall backward, eyes closed, believing you will be caught. “Lazarus is here beside me, and I’m picking up the tab, because he’s somebody who knows how to take a fall. His whole life amounted to one big shove, but he closed his eyes, and trusted that the arms were there to catch him. He died into life.

“You, on the other hand, Dives—sorry to say, you lived into death. It wasn’t the money that was the problem. It was you. You could never accept loss or failure. Not even the tiny ones you were dealt in your well-endowed existence. You always had to be a winner, and you succeeded, you won big. But really, you lost even bigger. You refused to die, because you didn’t believe that arms were there to catch you. Even when you closed your eyes as your body shut down, you refused to let go and fall into life. I’m sorry, Dives, I really am.”

With that Abraham sighs, turns away, and walks off, his arm round Lazarus’ shoulder. Dives never sees him again. The parable is quite shocking and that is deliberate. Sometimes we need hard words and images to drive a point home and Jesus did so often.

Jesus has been preaching constantly that the gospel is about death that leads to life. You must lose your life to find it. This is something Dives had yet to figure out. He is still clinging to his ego, his status, his pride. He cannot let go of the world as he constructed it. Dives is dead but he hasn’t died. He is in Hades but he hasn’t died the death that leads to life. A life that is worth living. This is the lesson Jesus wants so desperately for us to learn.

But how do you communicate such a complex, multilayered truth? You tell a shocking story and you embellish it with gruesome details like dogs licking sores. It is brilliant story telling, and it is a story that has been preserved now for thousands of years. It’s a story directed at Jesus’ listeners who need to begin the hard work of probing the condition of their own hearts. To consider how the darkness of one’s heart manifests itself.

And in this case the darkness reveals itself in Dives’ failure to love his neighbour. A neighbour right on his doorstep. It is a story about individual sin but it is sin that leads to real suffering on a societal level. The great chasm between rich and poor is represented by the chasm between Dives and Lazarus. It is a parable that speaks directly into the heart of our society and each of us. Our inaction in caring for our neighbours is creating “hell” for them.

Jesus’ parables were directed at those who saw themselves as God’s people. People who believed they were “in”. They were secure in their knowledge that they were God’s chosen, covenant people. Its shocking, but in this story those who believe they are in, are the ones in danger of Hell.

Sunday January 15th, 2023

Christians are notorious for believing they are “in” and their unbelieving neighbours are “out”. There is a kind of arrogance about how we see others sometimes. We think that if we don’t believe the right things; well, we end up sitting beside Dives. Surprisingly though, Jesus never talks specifically of our need to believe things, but rather to be concerned with the nature of our hearts. Jesus cares not about your theology, but rather about how you love your neighbour.

Its not about avoiding burning in Hell’s fires, but about dousing the flames that are making life hell for people here and now. It is not about trusting in our own righteousness. That we think we know the right things and do the right things, because our righteousness according to Isaiah is nothing but filthy rages. It is all about Christ’s righteousness, demonstrated by him and set as an example to us.

I found something that is profoundly convicting. Its from "1500 Inspirational Quotes and Illustrations" by M. Lunn as reprinted in "Swindoll’s Ultimate Book of Illustrations & Quotes" by Charles Swindoll

I was hungry and you formed a humanities club and you discussed my hunger. Thank you.

I was imprisoned and you crept off quietly to your chapel in the cellar to pray for my release.

I was naked and, in your mind, you debated the morality of my appearance.

I was sick and you knelt and thanked God for your health.

I was homeless and you preached to me of the spiritual shelter of the love of God.

I was lonely and you left me alone to pray for me.

You seem so holy; so close to God.

But I’m still very hungry and lonely and cold.

So where have your prayers gone? What have they done? What does it profit a man to page through his book of prayers when the rest of the world is crying for help.

Brothers and sisters, we are here at this worship service in honor of Jesus Christ. He tells us this story, but more than that, by his own example he shows us what it means to die into life. He is not afraid to close his eyes, let go, and fall backward, because he believes that arms are there to catch him. He tells us those arms are there for us as well.

By his word and example, we learn that the kingdom is not a place into which we strut. If we are to enter, we must close our eyes, let go, and fall backward, believing we will be caught. This needs to happen at the end of earthly existence and many times before.

It’s all a trust experience. We can live into death as Dives did. Or, like Jesus and Lazarus and every saint, we can die into life. Close your eyes. Lean back. Let go.