

The rich man that is referred to in today’s reading didn’t make it to heaven. He was a selfish, self righteous man. He thought he was “better than”, thought he ranked above those around him, particularly Lazarus... When we look at the verses before this parable from today’s reading, we see that with this story, Jesus was addressing the scribes and the Pharisees who were the religious big shots of Jesus’ time and they were “lovers of money” We learn here in this chapter and in other stories in our bible that lovers of money were indifferent to the poor and the needy. These “lovers of money” were very busy people - busy entertaining others, busy acquiring things, building larger homes, updating everything, busy travelling... they had real busy lives and no time for anybody not dealing with them directly! The lives of the Pharisees were very busy, and to live busy lives, they needed to have money - they were so busy making money so that they could be busy living that they didn’t even see the poor living right next door!

Makes you just not like those Pharisees so much doesn’t it? But the rich man’s behavior we read about today isn’t just a behavior that occurred a couple thousand years ago, and that behavior isn’t just a coincidence...

In 2012 a paper published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, showed through a variety of quizzes, online games, questionnaires and field studies that having wealth could dehumanize people. The study found that the wealthier a person was, the more likely it was that he or she would become less ethical, more selfish, and less compassionate than other people. A quote from paper reads as follows: “...the rich are way more likely to prioritize their own self-interests above the interests of other people...” (*Higher Social Class Predicts Increased Unethical Behavior*, by: Paul Piff) The rich tend to get real busy and don’t have time for others.

Please don’t get me wrong - I am NOT saying that all wealthy people are selfish, unethical people. There are all kinds of stories in the Bible about rich people going to heaven too. Father Abraham was himself enormously wealthy. And I don’t believe this parable is meant to condemn the wealthy people of today. You know who I mean right? The Kennedy’s, who support non-profit organizations through the Kennedy Foundation and who are prominent supporters of Special Olympics; Bill and Melinda Gates who support the Gates Foundation which is guided by the belief that every life has equal value and they focus on improving the health of ALL people and giving them the chance to lift themselves out of poverty. These are not people who can’t be bothered, who say, “Look, I’m real busy right now...” These are great examples of people doing with their wealth what the rich man in our story did not do...

There are also people rich people in our society who are “real busy right now” and act much like the rich man in our reading. There are entertainers, athletes, TV stars, musicians... **people**, who make boatloads of money that don’t support their own foundations - or anybody else’s foundation... Those are the people that this parable is about right? That’s who we want it to be about isn’t it? The super rich?... but it’s not, This parable of the rich man isn’t about “them”, the people that are “real busy right now”, it’s about you and me.

When we read the parables in the Bible, the message we are to receive is generally found at the end of the story, in the conclusion, and this parable is no different. The end of this parable is about the five brothers of the rich man. When the rich man understands his own destiny, his attention shifts to his brothers: ‘Then, father, I beg you to send (Lazarus) to my father’s house— for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’

Those “five brothers’ are us...

The rich man pleaded with father Abraham to send somebody from the dead so that his brother’s would know to believe; so that his brother’s would come to understand that being “real busy right now,” is not an excuse for overlooking those who are less fortunate. The rich man wanted his brother’s to see that they needed to slow down a bit, get a little less busy, recognize and repent of their sins. “...father Abraham... if someone goes to them from the dead, the will repent.” But Abraham said “no”. Abraham looked down at this rich man and basically said, “Look, if they don’t listen to Moses and the prophets, if they can’t come to believe by the witness of these amazing people, there is nothing I can do. There is no way someone rising from the dead is going to convince them.” --- He’s talking to us. We need to listen to

the word of the prophets, to the life stories presented to us in the bible. We need to listen to the message in the parables, in THIS parable...

What is the message we are to get from this parable? There are a number of different ways we could go with this, but I believe there are three key lessons in this one story. All of them point to slowing down, to learning how NOT to be "real busy right now..."

First of all, we must understand where we stand with God. Two things define this standing: 1. God loves each one of us and wants us in Heaven with him. John 3:16, "For God so loved the world..." right? And 2. Our sins are what separate us from God - and ALL of us are included in this separation. Isaiah 59:2, "But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you..." and Romans 3:23, "For ALL have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God."

The second lesson that we must understand is that Heaven cannot be earned. The rich man could not have gotten any extra points by tossing Lazarus a slice of bread every now and then. It would have been a nice thing to do, but it would have meant absolutely nothing if his heart wasn't in the gesture. If the rich man was "too busy right now" to see the face of Lazarus, to see the man inside the dirty, sore covered skin of a beggar who sat outside his door, that gesture of offering a piece of bread every now and then would have meant nothing. "For it is by grace you have been saved,... it is the gift of God— not by works... " (Ephesians 2:8-9) The price for our sins must be paid, but to try to bypass the death of Christ and earn our own way to Heaven is an insult to God...

And third, we must be willing to change our direction. The only thing sin will do is take us to Hell, to a death that will not allow us passage to eternal life with God our Father. Romans 6:23, "The wages of sin is death" The root of the sin that prevents eternal life is found in pride and self righteousness - Matthew 5:20 tells us that "...unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees..." - our righteousness must NOT be self righteousness - "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." Pride and self righteousness are exactly those characteristics found in the rich man in today's story. The man who was "too busy right now" to really see his neighbor...

The parable of the rich man is a parable of judgement. We come to know this rich man by the daily behaviors that are described to us. We see how busy he was - he was "real busy" - and we see that there came a time of judgement for him. Now, we all know that there will come a day of judgement. 2Corinthians 5:10, "*For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ...*"

For the rich man, it was a rather sobering judgement that makes me kind of cringe. The rich man's judgement leaves me feeling a bit fearful for my own judgment... Am I that different from the rich man? What will my own judgement look like?

But this parable is not only about judgement, it is also a parable of grace. There is grace for Lazarus whose life on earth was full of suffering and filled with utter misery. He received the grace of God and I think this is great! I have a tendency to root for the underdog - Lazarus was the underdog in this story, the rich man's behavior was inhumane - so I was pretty pleased to see that Lazarus received the grace of God. But then as I relax into the justice of God's grace in this story, I wonder what that means for me...

We live in one of the richest countries in the world. Living here we have what two-thirds of the world's population can only dream about. TWO-THIRDS of all the people in the world will NEVER enjoy the lifestyle that we have here. A lifestyle that we take for granted - even complain about! That makes this parable a little uncomfortable - we are a lot like that rich man aren't we? We have a tendency to respond to simple requests with "I'm real busy right now..." I catch myself doing that alot -- whether it's that Ryan is trying to tell me something or ask me something, or Dave asks for help with something at the Shoppe, or Kelly wants to share some company over coffee - my response is often, "I'm real busy right now..." What does that say about my own humanity? What does my future look like?

We all have to ask ourselves some very tough questions... Have we been good stewards of our riches? - not just our money, but everything that makes our lives rich... Do we share with people in need? Or do we, like the rich man in this parable, live selfish lives? Do we have time - do we take time - to notice and care about the less fortunate, the poor

in our world, in our own neighborhoods or are we just “real busy right now?” The answers to these questions may or may not bring judgement upon us, but this parable, this story of the rich man is kind of a “wake up call” for us...

Lazarus lived a life that none of us would ever want to live. Life for Lazarus was a hell-on-earth kind of life. One day after the other of hunger and suffering... There are a LOT of Lazarus' in the world... in this wealthy country, in our super rich and our barely making ends meet neighborhoods, there are people who are hungry, sick, unemployed and homeless... How do we treat the Lazarus' in our midst?

Proverbs 14 tells us that *“Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker...”* (Proverbs 14:31) Showing contempt for God is probably not a good idea... Look what happened to the rich man... The rich man oppressed the poor - he was “real busy right now” and didn't have the time and he did nothing and shared nothing with the Lazarus in his neighborhood. And this rich man received the judgement of God - just like we all will - and this man who was “real busy” was banished from eternal life in heaven.

We know that Lazarus was, by the grace of God, given life eternal, but I don't remember reading anything about how generous Lazarus was do you? I'm pretty sure he wasn't “real busy right now” because was sitting at the gate of the rich man's property. All we really know about Lazarus is that he was a poor, hungry person. We don't even know if he listened to God or obeyed his word! Lazarus was given a place of honor after he died. He was carried by angels to be with Abraham. Did he earn this place of honor by good works? I don't think so - first of all, based on what we read, we can be pretty sure that Lazarus' eternal reward was given by God's grace. Second, we know that you can't “earn” your way into heaven Ephesians 2:8, *“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God...”* Lazarus held a special place in God's heart...

For Luke, all poor have a special place. Luke believes that the poor are favored by God and will receive their justice when laid to rest, when they leave this earthly life. I read a theologian once who stated something along this line: The poor are poor because there is no one on their side - which is precisely why God is on their side. And we hear this again in Luke's version of the beatitude: *“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.”* (Luke 6:20). If Jesus was on the side of the poor and blessed them, and we are to be followers of Jesus, to live as he did, to be the hands and feet of Christ, then we are also called to be on the side of the poor and bless them - not just with our words, but also with acts of kindness, just like Jesus did... We are called to respond favorable and with kindness, not with apologies and the excuse that “I'm real busy right now.”...

There will come a time at the end of history when God is going to ask you: “What did you do for Lazarus?” We will each be asked that question someday and hopefully we will not say: “Oh, I tossed him a slice of bread every week or so”, or “I gave him some crumbs from my table. I cleaned my table and he got the crumbs that were left.” (And by “table”, I mean all of the benefits and comforts that we live with, not just our food...) I pray that each one of us is given the grace to listen to God's Word and respond to it by loving the Lazarus' of the world - the poor in our neighborhoods and all around the globe. Matthew 25:40, *“Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”*

I leave you with a poem from Tao and Zen: Note to Self:

“What is my purpose in life?” I asked the void.

“What if I told you that you fulfilled it when you took an extra hour to talk to that kid about his life?” said the voice.

“Or when you paid for that young couple in the restaurant? Or when you saved that dog in traffic? Or when you tied your father's shoes for him?”

“Your problem is that you equate your purpose with goal-based achievement. The Universe isn't interested in your achievements... just your heart. When you choose to act out of kindness, compassion and love, you are already aligned with your true purpose.

No need to look any further.”

When we choose to pay attention to, and really see the world around us, we will not be hindered by being “real busy right now”, we will understand our priorities. And our priorities are our brothers and sisters in Christ, regardless of their position in society...

AMEN