



SAINT LUKE'S

“OPENING THE GATES”
PROPER 21C

AMOS 6:1A, 4-7;
PSALM 146
1 TIMOTHY 6:6-19
LUKE 16:19-31

A SERMON BY THE REV. CAROLINE STACEY
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This is a challenging parable - and perfect for Stewardship Sunday! As the saying goes: the gospel comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. Today Jesus may cause us holy discomfort. It's hard to dodge Jesus' message. It's in every detail of this story. The poor man has a name - Lazarus is the only named person in all Jesus' parables. The rich man is sometimes named Dives, which simply means "rich man" in Latin. The rich man is in fact unnamed, a stand-in for all comfortably well-off people - which, compared with most people in the world, is many of us.

The lives of the rich man and Lazarus are connected but neither realizes how much until they die. I feel some sympathy for the rich man - he ends up in torment forever for not helping Lazarus. In the end God works for justice even if we do not. Yet this isn't primarily a story about future Divine judgment, it is intended as a warning for us today. It's too late for the rich man but it's not too late for us.

The Greek says that Lazarus was laid ("thrown, dumped") at the rich man's gate. The community lays the responsibility for Lazarus at the feet of the richest man in town, considering the rich man to be Lazarus'

best hope for assistance. Lazarus and the rich man live a few yards apart, presumably for years. Yards apart and worlds away. Lazarus needs food, housing and healthcare: three essentials. He bears the marks of poverty on his skin. The dogs come to lick his open sores – perhaps they are his only companions. The rich man meanwhile day after day feasts sumptuously and wears his expensive purple-dyed clothes.

The two men live completely separate lives because the rich man chooses that. The man of privilege lives behind gates that can only be opened from the inside. One of the great privileges of his wealth is that the rich man gets to choose when and why he opens his gates. When he chooses not to open his gate, he is safe and secure behind his walls of privilege. And contrary to some throughout history who may blame the victim for their poverty, in Jesus' story it is the *rich* man who is apathetic and makes poor choices with his huge discretionary income. Jesus doesn't ask the rich man to trade places with Lazarus, but to share.

Riches are not only money. Gates are not only physical. There are also emotional and spiritual barriers to our seeing others as fully human, just like

us. The rich man chooses day after day not to notice Lazarus at his gate. It takes a lot of energy to look the other way day after day.

Paul reminds young Timothy that *love* of money (not money itself) is a root of all kinds of evil. Money itself is neutral – it's how we use it that gives it moral value. *Love* of money, says Paul, causes people to pursue *senseless and harmful desires* and *pierces us with many pains of our own making*. Instead, Paul advises the wealthy to *do good, to be rich in good works, generous and ready to share*. This is good advice for those of us blessed with discretionary income beyond our basic needs. It is a blessing to be able to share what we have with others.

Each of us is called to share according to our situations. *To whom much is given much is expected.*¹ Netflix recently released a documentary series: *Inside Bill's Brain*. It follows the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's all-consuming work on 3 things: Eradicating polio; Slowing climate change by finding sustainable energy sources; and reducing childhood deaths by inventing sanitation options for countries without basic plumbing, so that hundreds of thousands of children under 5 don't die every year

¹ Luke 12:48

from preventable disease.² Some may say that compared to his wealth, Bill Gates is not really doing his share at all. However, what I see is an incredibly privileged man opening his heart and his wallet. That is – forgive the pun - gates opening. We may not be Bill Gates but there is always someone we can assist. There will always be those who have more than us and those who have less. Christ's call is to turn towards those who have less. Even if all we can give is a hug or a kind word or an invitation to coffee or a listening ear, or helping a neighbor with groceries or company to a medical appointment. It is not how much we have it is how much we share what we have.

Today is stewardship Sunday. St. Luke's may not be Lazarus at your gate but hopefully it is your spiritual home. St. Luke's is the place where you are always welcome, no matter what is going on in your life. We invite you to care for St. Luke's with love. Invest in St. Luke's generously with your time, talent and treasure. In conclusion, a reminder of why we pledge: The Biblical tithe or pledge comes from commandment to give 10% of the first fruits of the harvest back to God.³ And so we strive to tithe 10% as a foundation of living the Christian life. Pledging is what Christians do as part of our spiritual practice. We commit ahead of time to giving a portion of our

² According to the Centers for Disease Control, diarrhea kills 2,195 children every day – more than AIDS, measles and malaria combined.

³ Deuteronomy 26

resources back to God through the work of the church, as well as our time and our other talents through volunteering. Your vestry here builds the annual budget on our pledges – not on guessing how much we might put in the plate when we come to church! Collection monies are always welcome, but pledging is a more solid and helpful commitment to St. Luke’s than giving through the collection plate. With our pledges, the church can plan to sustain and expand our ministries and outreach programs, our children, youth and families programs and eldercare programs. This church in turn tithes 10% to the Diocese to help the poorest parishes and the Diocese tithes 10% to the national church for relief work at home and abroad. It is a cycle of giving and sharing.

On this stewardship Sunday I encourage you to make pledging part of your spiritual practice if it isn’t already. It may start out as a duty and become a delight. Build it into your life week by week. If you are already pledging, prayerfully consider if you can give a greater portion back to God through St. Luke’s. You will be glad you did. And your gifts will bear much fruit here. May God bless you and make you a blessing to others.

AMEN

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