

New Testament Lesson – Luke 16:19-31

The Rich Man and Lazarus

19 *“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. 20 At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores 21 and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.*

22 *“The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. 23 In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. 24 So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’*

25 *“But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. 26 And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’*

27 *“He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, 28 for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’*

29 *“Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’*

30 *“‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’*

31 *“He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”*

As we begin to work on taking the lessons of Christmas into our spiritual lives in the new year, we will be faced with much advice about making changes. This is the time for resolutions – many having to do with getting in shape or better money management - but sometimes we want to work on deeper things – release a character defect, or work on a neglected relationship. Whatever we choose, there is a lot of advice out there about new year’s resolutions. One that I want us to reflect on today has to do with regret...

Regret tends to not be very popular, and we hear advice like “Keep moving on, don’t look back, No regrets!” But is regret really an emotion to avoid? A new study says this:

Harvard School of Medicine:

“Regret can be a powerful emotion, so says a study from the Harvard School of Medicine Health News bulletin. Since the late 1990s, the study of regret has benefited from the availability of advanced neuro-imaging techniques. We have evidence that parts of the brain responsible for reasoning and emotion become active when a person experiences regret. In particular, an area known as the orbitofrontal cortex (OFC), located in a region of the brain responsible for reasoning, demonstrates increased OFC activity when people experience regret. And patients who have suffered injuries to that part of the brain are unable to experience or learn from regret.

Much of the literature on regret discusses its negative impact, but a new study highlights the benefits of regret. Colleen Saffrey at the University of Victoria and colleagues at the University of Illinois, writing in the journal *Motivation and Emotion*, provide evidence that people actually have a high regard for regret. In a study, the researchers asked subjects to reflect on 11 negative emotions — such as fear, anger, anxiety, and shame—in addition to regret. The subjects rated how much they agreed with statements about the value of the emotions, for example, whether an emotion “helps me know how to act in the future” or “improves my relationships with others.” Across the board, regret was the most highly valued of the negative emotions studied.

Regret has an important social context, too. We learn not only from our own mistakes, but from the mistakes of others. We also learn about preferable outcomes by seeing our peers, colleagues, or neighbors make favorable or unfavorable choices. This may engender envy or relief, but—either way—it helps us figure out how to improve our lot.

Managing regret productively may be an essential ingredient for mental health, a good quality of life, and a positive sense of well-being.”

Okay, well maybe regret isn’t so bad after all! Today let’s look at two stories about regret. The first one is our gospel reading for today – the story of Lazarus. And the second is a familiar classic fable by Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*. First let’s look at the gospel reading:

This story is told only in Luke, and it is a parable. That means that is designed to make a strong point, and it is not meant to explain an entire theology or to be logically or rationally correct. When Jesus teaches in parables we often see that the result is to “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable” – in other words there’s always a surprise ending, and listeners don’t get what they were expecting. This parable is realistic in its portrayal of the vast gap between rich and poor.

The phenomenon of the poor waiting for crumbs at the doors of the rich is a detail taken straight from first-century life, and there were particular gates outside the temple designated for beggars – it was required of a holy person to not ignore these beggars in need.

But this parable is a little different than other typical parables! For one thing, this one does not stay just in the realm of first-century village life. It spans this life and the next.

It would be strange to first century ears that in that the reversal of fortunes it depicts contradicts the widespread belief that wealth was a sign of God's favor and poverty a sign of sin.

First-century hearers of this parable would not have assumed that the rich man was evil and that the poor man was righteous. On the contrary, wealth in the ancient world was often viewed as a sign of divine favor, while poverty was viewed as evidence of sin. The rich man's sin was not that he was rich, but that, during his earthly life, he did not "see" Lazarus, despite his daily presence at the entrance to his home. The first time he ever sees Lazarus is when, from Hades "he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side.

Now we know that names and numbers have meaning in Scripture, and so does the name used here – Lazarus. Notice the rich man doesn't have a name, but the poor man does. There are some rabbinic tales featuring the name Lazarus as one who walks on earth as Abraham's servant, or spy, reporting back to him on how well his children are observing Torah's directives for treatment of the poor. So the rich man doesn't acknowledge Lazarus doesn't "see" him, until he sees him in the afterlife in the presence of Abraham.

The rich man calls Abraham his "Father" but this alone does not gain him any mercy. The scriptures – both old and New Testament – are clear that our spiritual purity and maturity is measured by how we treat those who are less fortunate, privileged, healthy, influential – who are weaker, sicker, more economically challenged. Even though the rich man calls Abraham "Father" he has not shown compassion as he was directed to do by the law, by Torah, and so he is cast into agonizing want in the afterlife.

Well, fortunately this IS a parable - a teaching story, not a prediction. Its outcome depends on our choices. And our choices begin with "seeing" – what will we give our attention to? In the story the rich man never even notices Lazarus until he sees him with Abraham. For the rich man in this story, Lazarus is never really a real person – never worth noticing, much less having compassion on, or helping. And his plea is, "I didn't know. I didn't realize. Please, Lazarus go visit my living brothers so that they will believe". And Abraham says, "No, I'm not going to do it. Because they can see right now if they want to, and sending someone from the dead to witness to them won't make them want to see any more than they do now, so I won't waste the energy to warn them. They've been warned".

And so we don't get to see the redemptive outcome that may be possible when true regret is followed by true repentance, and then by spiritual transformation. In this parable we get a warning, but we don't get a happy ending.):

This parable made me think of another, more modern parable, written by an author and social commentator whose work I really admire – Charles Dickens – Oliver Twist, Great Expectations, A Christmas Carol. His great great grandson, Gerald Dickens, actor and producer here in Kansas City keeps his stories alive by performing them regularly around the world. In A Christmas Carol, Dickens' main character, Ebenezer Scrooge, is like the rich man. He is aware of poverty, illness, and misfortune – but he indulges in that ancient and tragic excuse of blaming the victim. Claiming that anyone could be as wealthy as he is if they would simply work hard enough! And all the while he – like the rich man in the parable in Luke - is very unaware of his own spiritual poverty.

His financial partner, Jacob Marley, who died seven years earlier, is experiencing in the afterlife what the rich man and Lazarus experience – that the rich and the poor – the fortunate and the unfortunate – all exist in sight of one another but have switched places.

Those who were smug and self righteous in their wealth are now in agony living in the squalor of their spiritual poverty – the character and compassion that they should have strengthened and nurtured in their earthly lives, rather than being so focused on their material wealth, is not very lacking and they do not have enough spiritual depth and strength to experience prosperity in the afterlife. So they suffer.

Jacob Marley makes the same request that the rich man makes – please to my living friend and warn him, because if someone comes back from the dead and warns him he will listen. But Jacob Marley's request is granted. He is allowed to come back from the dead and warn his friend. But at first, Ebenezer Scrooge doesn't listen either. Three more spirits from the afterlife have to come and visit him before he is really changed. And not just generosity born of fear, but he's really changed!!! He sees people like he didn't see them before. They are real, important, unique beings in his eyes and he is delighted and understanding with everyone he meets.

So, what does it take for us to really see people? We don't have to be wealthy, beautiful, or famous or especially favored to treat others with disrespect. We just have to be self absorbed and short sighted, unaware of others – maybe even self pitying or resentful. When God takes those obstacles away – as only God can and we cannot do ourselves, then we can see- really see – people!

Remember the random acts of kindness? Practice intentional acts of kindness.....

I invite you to reflect on what the blocks are in your life that might keep you from really seeing people in the light in which God sees them. Sometimes its emotional pain – old hurts maybe from years ago that are still hurting – abandonment by a parent, a marriage that didn't work out, being passed over for that raise or promotion that you were just sure were yours, children not living their lives as we think they should perhaps even going far from the path we laid out for them Is there some kind of hopelessness that has caused you to be cynical about humanity, and about God's destiny for humanity?

God has a dream, and that dream is going to be lived out by us. The dream is prosperity, dignity, peace – a commonwealth of love and shalom. God is counting on being able to work through us in making that dream come alive and to do that we have to be able to see with the eyes of God, with the vision of God.

Howard Thurman:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost, To heal the broken, To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner, To rebuild nations,
To bring peace among people,
To make music in the heart.

So in the new year let's begin the work of Christmas by looking at the people in your life and really see them – sharing what you can, giving encouragement, connecting in meaningful ways, leaving them with an encouraging word and a hopeful heart. Amen.