

Sermon: *Lazarus is at the Gate* Sept. 26, 2010

Scripture: Luke 16: 19-31

What a story! Jesus tells this story of “a certain rich man” in the hearing of a bunch of Pharisees (religious, self-righteous, legalistic Jews), challenging their belief that wealth was a sign of God’s blessing, and poverty a sign of God’s displeasure.

This rich man is **very** rich. He wears purple (only rich people could afford purple dyed clothing) and the very finest linen. His table groans with fine food. Let’s face it, his TV screen is probably six feet across, and comes down from the ceiling at the press of a button – and then silently goes back up when not in use. (I know, I know – they didn’t have television in those days – but you get the drift!) He was **very** rich.

Lazarus lies at the gate of the rich man’s house. The gate keeps him and others like him outside. He has no part to play in the rich man’s life. He doesn’t even get the scraps from the rich man’s table – tho the rich man knows his name.

Lazarus is sick. He has sores all over his body and he is too weak from hunger and disease to defend himself from the dogs who come and lick his wounds. Even the dogs take advantage of his weakness – his vulnerability.

Lazarus is at the gate. What does this story have to say to **us**? As we look around at life in the 21st century on Planet Earth – where do we see the Lazarus at **our** gates? Jesus was talking to the Pharisees in his community – the law-and-order guys. These were self-righteous,

wealthy men who really believed that if you were poor and ill, like Lazarus, it was probably because you deserved it. And if you were wealthy like they were – it was **not** because you exploited the poor and the weak – but because you had found favour with God.

Lazarus is at the gate of the **wealthy**. Where does all this wealth come from? In Canada we have what is called a resource-based economy.

We have been called “hewers of wood and drawers of water” - which is fairly apt. I remember in the 60’s learning that 50 cents of every dollar earned in BC came from the forest – came from cutting down trees.

I remember the building of huge dams across our major rivers to produce low-cost hydro-electric power – energy to be sold to the highest bidder. I remember the building of fish ladders to try to mediate the damage such projects did to the wild salmon runs returning to the streams to spawn.

I remember my visceral feelings of horror and disgust when I first learned about the “draggers” – the large fish boats that drag their nets along the ocean floor taking absolutely everything in their path – breaking the coral and destroying the marine ecology. After the draggers have been through, the ocean floor looks like a moonscape – barren and deserted – lifeless.

Lazarus is at the gates with open sores oozing poisonous discharge. I close my eyes and I can see pictures of the tar sands operations in Alberta – open weeping sores in the body of the earth. The open tailing ponds so poisonous that ducks which land on them

die. I hear the cries of First Nations peoples that their drinking water is no longer fit to drink, and the fish from their rivers have cancerous growths and other deformities and are not fit to eat – and I wonder – do you wonder sometimes?

And then Lazarus died – and was no longer at the gate of the wealthy...

What will happen to us my friends when there is no more oil, when we have cut down all the trees, when we have no clean drinking water, when the oceans are so polluted they cannot sustain life? What will happen to us then? And our children, and their children?

What would become of the wealthy without Lazarus? “The rich man died and was buried.” “Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony,” cried the dead rich man. Without water we would **all** be in agony. Without the gifts of our Creator we would none of us be alive. We have been plundering those gifts for centuries to create wealth for some and misery for many.

Send Lazarus, the rich man cries. Even in death he can only see Lazarus as his errand boy. He has no appreciation for the fact that Lazarus is as much a child of the Creator as he is. Just as he has no understanding that his amassing of great wealth, at the expense of the poor and weak, is not pleasing to God, and is in the end, not sustainable, as we are finding out. The great chasm of the rich man’s total lack of compassion or empathy is the great tragedy of his life.

Send Lazarus to warn my five brothers, says the dead rich man. Again he saw Lazarus only as a servant, as less than his brother – he consistently failed to see the neighbor who was right outside his gate.

If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced by Lazarus, says Father Abraham. Have there been prophets in our times who we have not listened to?

I think of Dr. David Suzuki who has just announced his retirement this year. Dr. Suzuki has been warning us about the perils of our abuses of the earth for more than fifty years. As a biologist, and a lover of nature and of humanity, this gentle man has been prodding us for all of my adult life to treat our earth more kindly. We have not allowed ourselves to feel the pain of our neighbours, even more so we have not allowed ourselves to feel the pain of the earth. In the name of progress and the “good life” we have taken whatever we wanted, no matter what the cost to the environment, no matter what creature’s habitat we have destroyed or contaminated.

We are created from the very elements of the earth on which we walk. We are water. We are nitrogen. We are iron. We are calcium. The very air we breathe contains the oxygen we could not live for more than a few minutes without.

People of God, let us honour all that God loves. Like me, I’m sure that you want your grandchildren and their children to lie on their backs and watch the stars in the night sky, to count the petals of a daisy, to fish for salmon off our wharf, and to love and be loved as we are all loved by our Creator.

We are part and parcel of the web of life that God has created. If we make too many holes in the web, it will weaken, and like Lazarus, it will collapse and die.

Lazarus lies just outside our gate. What should we do?