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Our Saviour Lutheran Church  
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Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, we have before us today a gospel text that I hope we have all heard before.

It is the story of Lazarus and Dives, Dives being the rich man's name in Latin.

Now, we may be more familiar with Charles Dickens' version of the story, which is called *A Christmas Carol*.

Remember that story with the ghosts of Christmas past, present, and future.

Ebenezer Scrooge is the rich man in Dickens' version of the story.

And Dickens' really liked this bible story about Lazarus and Dives, but he didn't like the ending.

He didn't like the fact that the rich man didn't have the possibility of redemption.

So Dickens' changed it, and Scrooge, as we know, is transformed in the end of Dickens' telling of the story.

PAUSE

Now, it is likely that this story about the rich man and Lazarus, it is likely that this story and others like this one are what got Jesus killed, because Jesus gives a scathing, a SCATHING critique here.

For who is it that dressed in purple in Jesus' day?

Mine you, purple dye for clothing was extracted from seashells, and it was a very expensive process, which is why only certain people could afford purple cloth for clothing.

So who is it that dressed in purple in Jesus' day?

Who is it that Jesus' critiques here?

Royalty. Really rich people. And the Jewish high priest.

Yes, it is all but certain, as we will see later, that the rich man Jesus has in mind here is none other than the Jewish high priest in Jesus' day, the high priest whose name is Caiaphas.

Yes, the high priest would dress in purple, too.

So, this story is most likely a critique against Caiaphas, and the high priest would not have taken kindly to such a critique.

And so, like I said, it was probably this story and others like it that got Jesus killed.

This story then is a very layered text.

PAUSE

Now, in truth, Jesus does not name the rich man, so conceivably the hearers of this story in Jesus' day were invited to put the name of any rich man into the story.

We might put the name of any rich man or rich woman from our day into the story.

We might, dare I say, even put our own names into the story.

For if we pause to think about it, most everyone one of us is extremely rich.

We probably have never have had to worry about from where our next meal was coming.

We probably have never have had to worry about whether we would have a bed to sleep on at night.

We are among those who have been very blessed in this life.

Yes, in comparison to much of the rest of the world, we are very wealthy indeed.

So, the rich man is not named in this story. Dives is given later as his name, like I said, from the Latin translation of the Bible.

But the rich man not being name here is strange.

For über rich persons in the ancient world, and in our contemporary world, of course have names. They are particular people.

We know who they are. And these über rich persons want to be known often enough.

So, for Jesus to forego naming the rich man is a bit of a slight on those in high society.

But notice who is named in the story? The poor, leprous man.

Indeed this is the only time, the ONLY time, Jesus gives a name to a character in his stories, and the name he gives the poor, leprous man is Lazarus.

Jesus gives the man the name of his best friend, the man whom Jesus loved, the man for whom Jesus wept when Lazarus died.

Jesus names the poor, leprous man, but does not name the rich man.

Why does he name the man Lazarus?

Well, Jesus might be saying something about whom we are to call our best friends.

If Jesus would associate his best friend with an impoverished, infirmed, social pariah, that is whom we also are to associate with. That is who we are to call our best friends.

So again, this is a very layered text. There are multiple connections and interpretations weaved into this text.

PAUSE

Now, notice the description of the rich man's house.

In effect it is a compound. There is a gate. And there are guard dogs, and presumably guards who stand at the gate.

And, it is interesting to note that the poor man has a rapport with the dogs, they even lick his wounds.

Lazarus has then seemingly been at the rich man's gate for a good while.

The dogs don't attack him. The guards have not chased Lazarus off, which one would expect because people of stature would be coming through the gate to meet with the rich man.

And, the rich man wouldn't want his guests to have to see this poor, leprous man at his gate, unless the rich man allowed Lazarus to be there.

So, Lazarus has apparently been granted permission to beg at the rich man's gate.

And Lazarus has satisfied his hunger with the scraps from the rich man's bounty.

In effect, the rich man in this story is actually being quite gracious to Lazarus.

But, then the story takes a turn; Jesus says that both men died.

And the rich man finds himself in Hades, tormented by fire.

Why? For after all, the rich man Dives had actually shown mercy to Lazarus.

And we almost have to wonder, if the rich man, who had shown mercy, ended up in Hades, what chance do we have?

PAUSE

And then we hear that the rich man pleads with Father Abraham, saying, "Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue for I am in agony in these flames."

Even in Hades the rich man has the audacity to command from others, not just from Father Abraham, but from Lazarus himself.

But Father Abraham tells Dives that now the roles are reversed from what they once were in life. Lazarus who once suffered evil things is now comforted, and the rich man is in agony.

The rich man then pleads with Abraham to warn his five brothers.

And this detail of the rich man having five brothers is significant.

As we said earlier, this is probably Caiaphas the high priest for Caiaphas had five brothers, so in all likelihood Jesus is here condemning Caiaphas to the fiery afterlife.

Jesus is condemning the Jewish religious system of his day.

Again, this would not have boded well for Jesus.

Again, this is a layered text.

Jesus is taking shots at Caiaphas.

And yet the rich man in this text is actually merciful.

The rich is doing more than any good Jew of his day would have been expected to do for a poor, leprous man.

What more did Jesus expect of him?

What more does Jesus expect of us?

What is the problem?

Well, Friends, the problem seems to revolve around the idea of “relationship” or more rightly the lack thereof.

For we see the rich man Dives uses a surrogate to care for Lazarus.

Dives has no relationship with Lazarus. Indeed, Dives has his servants throw scraps to Lazarus at the gate of his house.

But Dives has no direct interaction with Lazarus.

Dives treats Lazarus as an object of his generosity.

Yes, Lazarus may have been no more than a talking point for Dives with his guests—a talking point about Dives’ generosity.

And so the point is this.

Dives should have been engaged in Lazarus’ life. Dives should have been in relationship with him.

And I think about this text. I think about how this text pertains to us. I think about how at times when we have had events here at church, where we have had leftover food, how we often decided to drop off the food at Bethesda Mission.

And although that is a gracious thing, our Lord Jesus would probably challenge us like he is challenging Caiaphas here, so as to tell us that we really should be in relationship with the people at Bethesda Mission.

In truth, how many times do we bring our leftovers—our food, our clothing that doesn’t fit anymore, our disposable income to the homeless and needy...

How many times do we bring our leftovers to the neighbor in need, turn away again, and think to ourselves, “I did good.”

Don’t get me wrong, we need to be generous, but Jesus challenges us to go a step further and to be in relationship with our neighbors.

In short, Lazarus should have been invited pass the gate and into Dives’ home. Lazarus should have been sitting with Dives at his table.

In the same way, the poor and needy who exist among us should not just be on the surface of our emotions, but should be invited into our hearts.

Yes, this is a challenging text. It is a very layered text. And as I said, Charles Dickens really liked this text.

But I think Dickens misses something at the end of his work *A Christmas Carol*.

Scrooge sends a turkey to the home of Bob Cratchit, his employee whose family is described as just eking out a living, and whose youngest child Tiny Tim is infirmed.

Dickens misses something.

Dickens’ story would have been much more in keeping with what Jesus was getting at, if Scrooge had invited the Cratchit family as a whole to come to his home for Christmas dinner.

It would have been much more in keeping with Jesus’ point, if the Cratchit family had been welcomed to partake at Scrooge’s table.

To his credit though, Dickens does describe Scrooge as becoming a sort of father figure to Tiny Tim, thus emphasizing that call from Jesus to us all to be in relationship with our neighbors in need.

PAUSE

Now, in the gospel story here, Abraham tells the rich man that his brothers have Moses and the prophets; that they can refer to them and heed their warnings so that they don’t fall into the same torment as the rich man.

In Deuteronomy, a writing attributed to Moses, it says, “You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.”

And in the prophets, specifically Isaiah, it says, “Is not this the fast the Lord’s requires, to share your bread with the hungry and to bring the homeless poor into your house?”

Moses and the prophets admonish us to care for the poor.

But the rich man begs Abraham to send Lazarus to them, so that his brothers would believe because someone has risen from the dead.

And this of course is not just an allusion to Lazarus whom Jesus does raise, but also an allusion to Jesus’ own resurrection.

But, Jesus responds to the rich man, saying that they will not believe even if someone rises from the dead, which of course is another critique of the Jewish high officials who have not believed in Jesus and his resurrection.

Again, this is a very layered text.

But, notice Luke here is wont to say that how can anyone proclaim the Good News of Christ’s resurrection, and not also then help one’s neighbor in need.

The two things go hand in hand—belief in the resurrection and service to the neighbor in need.

And for a person to call himself or herself a Christian while at the same time turning a blind eye to the needy neighbor is a huge disconnect.

God’s love for us as revealed in the cross and resurrection necessarily translates into our love for other people.

Anything short of that is to put a great chasm in our relationship between us and God.

And so, let us pray...God our Father, remove the chasms between us and you, by removing our indifference to serve our neighbor in need. Teach us to nurture relationships with the poor among us, even to be so bold as to invite others to our table as you have invited us to your table here in church. In Christ, we pray ... Amen.