

Luke 16:19-31

[Jesus said:] "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.' He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him 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.' Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.' He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"

Sermon: Internal Audit

Every year in June we ask have a sheet in the bulletin that invites the congregation to list their three favorite hymns, and we compile the results and use those hymns over the summer. The hymn I want to use to open the sermon this morning has never once been on that list of favorites. In fact, this hymn is not in the hymnal we now use and it was not in the hymn we previously used, the red Pilgrim Hymnal published in 1963. It was, however, in this earlier edition of the Pilgrim Hymnal, published in 1931 – two years into the Great Depression. It suits its time.

The hymn was written by Rev. Robert Davis, who was an interim pastor of the Union Church of Proctor, Vermont – the church I served before coming here. I was told that Rev. Davis had retired in Vermont after working for the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe after World War II. When I tried to find more information about Rev. Davis on the web, the only thing I discovered was that in addition to writing this hymn, he is credited with writing the words to the Christmas favorite, The Friendly Beasts.

So, in the Depression era Pilgrim Hymnal, #332 is I Thank Thee Lord by Robert Davis; you may recognize it because I've used it in our prayers:

I thank Thee, Lord, for strength of arm

To win my bread,

And that, beyond my need, is meat

For friend unfed:

I thank Thee much for bread to live,

I thank Thee more for bread to give.

I thank Thee for my quiet home,

'Mid cold and storm,

And that, beyond my need, is room

For friend forlorn:

I thank Thee much for place to rest,

But more for shelter for my guest.

I thank Thee, Lord, for lavish love

On me bestowed,

Enough to share with loveless folk

To ease their load:

Thy love to me I ill could spare,

Yet dearer is Thy love I share.

Robert Davis (b. 1881)

I think when we hear the parable of the rich man, Dives in Latin, and Lazarus, the poor man at his doorstep, we hear a call to provide material assistance to those who lack the basics we have in various measures of abundance. And it certainly is that – a parable about bread and shelter. But in his hymn Davis takes us a step further –

I thank Thee, Lord, for lavish love

On me bestowed,

Enough to share with loveless folk

To ease their load:

Thy love to me I ill could spare,

Yet dearer is Thy love I share.

In truth, even those who may not have been particularly rich in bread and shelter but who have felt very rich in the love of God have reached out around the world to share this with the many faces of Lazarus who were homeless and hungry at the near and distant doorsteps.

The people who reached out did not always have a lot of money or an abundance of means. But they were rich in enthusiasm and a sense of purpose. The front page story in the September edition of the newsletter of the Connecticut Conference of the United Church of Christ reminds us that this month we celebrate the two hundredth anniversary of the founding of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, the first organization of Protestants in America to send missionaries into foreign lands.

This all seems like second nature to us now – missionaries in foreign lands, but that was not always the case. The spark for this organization was struck by a group of college students at Williams – right up route 7 on the banks of the Hoosic River in Williamstown Mass. The story is these students were in an outdoor prayer meeting when a quick moving thunderstorm forced them to seek shelter in a haystack. They had been discussing and praying about leaving the comforts of home to bring the Gospel to the farthest corners of the globe. They took the storm as a sign, a validation of their purpose, and after they graduated college and were in seminary they came to the churches of Connecticut and asked for help in putting their dream into action. The result was the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, which in 1812 sent five men and three women on a mission to India.

So the Haystack Prayer Meeting, as it came to be known, set in motion this movement that remains a vital part of our sense of church here in the twenty-first century. The history of foreign missions has both bright spots and dark moments and many, many stories of courage and sacrifice. And as much as it went forth in the spirit of the Gospel to share the Love of God, it also came back in home visits to raise funds, educate congregations, involve youth and adult fellowships, and challenge churches to change their outlook and even their organization in order to be more effective for the cause of Christ.

When missionaries went into the distant corners of the world they encountered poverty and need like they had never known at home. It didn't take them long to realize that missionary work would be 90% action and 10% explanation – that their example would be far more powerful than their literature. Lazarus was at their door – they could not ignore the material needs while speaking of spiritual riches.

They also realized that all the distinctions which separated them into denominations at home were more than useless in the mission fields – they were an obstacle to the Gospel. For our retreat last week I asked our confirmation class to prepare a family tree showing the various faith traditions of their parents, grandparents and great grandparents. Just in our small group of 12 people we came up with this list:

I tried to explain a bit what some of the differences were between these various groups, but I could see eyes starting to glaze over, because it is a dense and confusing web of interrelationships to unravel and understand. The missionaries in foreign lands faced a much more difficult task. In lands that had never heard the Gospel, they couldn't be burdened with the task of sorting out why this one is a Methodist and this one is a Presbyterian, and this one is Congregational.

When missionaries came back to the United States they brought a clear message: People, we have to work together. We cannot afford distinctions and duplications in the mission fields. Where the need is for a school, we need to cooperate in building one. Where the need is for medical care, we need to cooperate to recruit doctors and nurses.

Out of this feedback loop of sharing love and providing service in foreign lands, the American church was challenged to get over their disputes and work together in unified witness. Out of this feedback loop from the missionaries groups, like the National Council of Churches and Church World Service were formed. I would even say that out of this feedback loop four different traditions began negotiations that culminated in 1957 in the formation of the United Church of Christ, our denomination, a denomination

that has been and continues to be very much shaped for mission and service in partnership with a world wide communion of faith.

You don't have to look to the past to see this dynamic at work. In addition to celebrating the 200th anniversary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, this year's annual state meeting of our church will honor the work of Bryan Nurnberger, the founder of Simply Smiles. Bryan has come and spoken to us several times about Simply Smiles, about the fact he had no intention of getting involved with helping children and families in Mexico but an injury and some enforced free time on a rock climbing trip put the needs of these children in his path, in his field of view. Both because he has an open heart and, I trust, in part because he was raised in the fellowship of the Congregational Church in Naugatuck, Bryan could not turn away from these children.

He sought ways to serve them in Mexico and when he came home to Connecticut he told his story to his home church in Naugatuck and to his grandmother's church in Bethlehem and he asked for help. The feedback loop was established, the word was spread, and churches that had been neighbors for years but basically operating on their own were soon working together on fundraising, education, and mission trips.

We, too, have been drawn into this circle and are happily being changed and shaped by Simply Smiles. On October 16 we will have a group going to a dinner and art auction in Southbury sponsored by the Roxbury Congregational Church – imagine that, New Milford and Roxbury working together. By the way, I have tickets to the dinner if anyone would like to join us. And plans are underway for a mission trip to Mexico next summer – Mary Eherts is the point person on that.

What Bryn and others help us to remember is that there is a big world at our doorstep – in spite of many changes to the way people live, Lazarus remains emblematic of millions still homeless and hungry. To bear witness to the richness of grace and peace we know in Jesus Christ, our faith must be more than words. As our closing hymn will remind us: They will know we are Christians by our Love.