September 29, 2013 – 19th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 21)

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Yesterday, at the Diocesan Convention, Bishop George Young, the Bishop of our companion Diocese of East Tennessee, preached on the Gospel passage we just heard. He said he thought it was mighty interesting that we had a story of a rich man going to hell just as we're all kicking off our stewardship drives. Hmmm… I'm SURE it was just a coincidence…

But believe it or not, I'm NOT going to talk about stewardship or pledging or tithing today, in spite of the temptation. Well, at least not directly…

In the parable we heard today about the rich man and a poor beggar named Lazarus, we are given very detailed descriptions of these two men. Maybe even a little too detailed!

This nameless rich man, the text says, wore purple and fine linen. In ancient times, purple dye came from a rare type of sea snail and was very expensive and greatly prized – so much so that it became associated with very high rank or even royalty.

And later in the story, Abraham tells the rich man that his brothers have Moses and the prophets to warn them about what might befall them, which would imply that the rich man was a Jew. So, putting it together, we have a high-ranking, almost royal Jew, or in other words, most likely a Pharisee – Jesus' favorite sparring partners on the topic of the poor.

Whoever he was, he was certainly a conspicuous consumer. Normally, fancy feasts and banquets would be saved for special occasions, but this guy feasted sumptuously every day, and he ate so carelessly that goodies routinely fell off of his table. He clearly did not suffer from food insecurity.

So we have a filthy rich, carelessly gluttonous Pharisee, with bad table manners. Luke doesn't paint a very sympathetic character here.

Then we have Lazarus, who is not to be confused with the brother of Martha and Mary in the Gospel of John. Except for his name, poor Lazarus has absolutely nothing. We find him lying by the rich man's gate, presumably very sick because he's covered in sores, and maybe even dying of illness or starvation.

I can imagine him lying there, looking through the bars of the gate into the courtyard, where the rich man is tearing into his chow. And I can imagine the rich man stepping over him, or kicking him aside as he goes to and from his house, only noticing him because of the inconvenience he causes.

Lazarus is a heartbreaking sight, lying there sick and alone except for some dogs who try to give him comfort by licking his sores, which only serves to make him more unclean. He's everything the Pharisees would despise, and the embodiment of everyone Jesus champions – the poor, the blind, the lame.

So the scene is set and the real drama begins. Lazarus dies and is carried off by the angels to be with Abraham in heaven. The rich man is buried, and ends up in Hades, suffering great torment, and ends up begging for help from Lazarus. The temptation here is to say rich is bad and poor is good, and that greedy so-and-so got just what was coming to him! But one reason it's tempting is because then we can divorce ourselves from the rich man because of course WE would never be that stingy or mean.

But it's not all about the money. Believe it or not, money itself is not evil. In 1st Timothy today, we heard that it's the LOVE of money that is the root of all kinds of evil, not the actual money itself. Money is handy and useful, and oftentimes it's the most efficient way to help the most people. So it's not about the money.

It's about relationships. It's about connection.

I spent a lot of time this weekend talking with some of the mission priests in the Diocese, especially Mother Lauren Stanley on the Rosebud and Mother Margaret Watson on the Cheyenne River. They see Lazaruses every day, but rather than step over them, they pick them up, feed them, sometimes out of their own food supplies, and give them whatever help they can to get them back on their feet.

The news on the reservations is not good. On Cheyenne River, there is 87 percent unemployment. People are dying, almost daily from alcohol and drug related issues, from preventable diseases like diabetes and heart disease, and from suicide. In fact, both Mother Margaret and Mother Lauren had to leave the convention briefly to conduct funerals just this weekend. And frankly, if this threatened government shut down happens, the fallout on the reservations will be disastrous.

But in the midst of the disaster, real relationships are being formed and nurtured. Relationships between Mother Margaret and Mother Lauren and the people of their respective missions. Relationships between them and the Diocese. And relationships between them and the people like us who try to help in whatever way we can. In a very real sense, we become family.

But as good hearted as I know most people are, are we still stepping over the Lazaruses we encounter in our busy lives? Do we even see them lying there? Do we avoid eye-contact because it might be awkward, or we're in a hurry? Who are the most needy, the most vulnerable, the Lazaruses among us right here in Huron, and are we willing to get down into the dirt with them to feed them and tend to their sores? Are we willing to become connected?

In Jesus' parable, Abraham tells the rich man that there is an impassable chasm between him and Lazarus. That chasm didn't just appear when the two men died as a convenient plot device. That chasm was created, inch by inch, foot by foot, mile by mile, by the rich man himself. Every time he refused food to Lazarus, the chasm grew. Every time he stepped by him without seeing him, the chasm grew even wider. And every time he didn't acknowledge their shared humanity, it grew impossibly wide.

Jesus isn't indicting wealth here, although we readers of Luke can't help but be aware of how much Jesus cares for the poor and is constantly telling the rich to share. In spite of what I said at the beginning of this sermon, Jesus isn't saying that everyone who is rich will end up in eternal torment. It's not the rich man's wealth that gets him into trouble; it's his refusal to acknowledge Lazarus as a fellow human being, and his refusal to enter into a relationship with Lazarus based on that alone.

One of my best friends lives in Key West, Florida. Key West's motto is One Human Family. This is what we all are – one human family. We are equally important in God's eyes, and no amount of wealth or status or privilege will make him love us more than anyone else.

Let's rewrite the parable a little. Let's say the rich man sees Lazarus peering through the gate and between mouthfuls, he motions one of his servants over. "Throw that guy a crust of bread," he instructs the servant, "and get him the heck offa my lawn!"

Though he would have helped Lazarus out, I maintain he would have still been in hot water by Jesus' standards because he still didn't see Lazarus as a fellow human being, as someone to have a relationship with.

Okay, I said I wasn't going to talk about stewardship, but I fibbed a little. I would like us all to think about our stewardship and pledging in terms of relationship building. With our pledges and our giving, we're doing so much more than just keeping the lights on. We're creating connections and bonds with people – with other children of God.

When we give our time, talent, and treasure with sincerity, we are forming lasting relationships – be it with the Kindernook children and their parents, or the kids in Lower Brule, or the people in Cheyenne River, or the Karen folks we're helping to stay in this country. We're forging connections that acknowledge our shared humanity and make us one human family.

This is what Jesus did. He gave everything. He emptied himself to become one of us – not LIKE one of us, but one of us. He shared our humanity, and became the pattern for us to follow. And then he gave everything again to die on the Cross for our redemption. By living and dying as one of us, he invited us into an eternal relationship with God. We became family – one human family.

The very least we can do in return is to share ourselves with each other. To stop, kneel down, look into the eyes of Lazarus, and say, "How can I help you, my brother?"

Amen.