

Around this time last year I was coming to the end of my job search journey. Freshly employed here at Church of the Good Shepherd, I was ready to find an apartment and move into a place of my own. After a couple fruitless tours I finally landed on a decent spot: affordable, not too far from work, close to several grocery stores and restaurants. They even had a pool—which I must admit now that I’ve moved out, I didn’t actually enter once.

But what really sold me on this apartment was the road outside, a quiet, shady stretch of concrete lined by trees. At the beginning of fall, as the leaves start to change color, that stretch was so scenic and peaceful. “I wouldn’t mind living here,” I thought as I drove away from my apartment tour.

I noticed a bus stop right outside the apartment. Now in my year of living in that apartment I never actually saw a bus arrive at this bus stop. But there was a man inside the stop. He had long hair and was hunched over at an odd angle, his back twisted—either from birth or from some tragedy in his life, I don’t know.

This man often waited in that empty bus stop, sheltering from the rain and wind and sun. I saw him over and over during my first few months living in that area, waiting in the bus stop or wandering around the parking lots of the gas station and grocery stores. Then one day he was gone. I don’t know where he went.

This is a common sight in modern America, where civic and social disfunction often leave the unhoused and mentally ill to fend for themselves. Just a few blocks from here a young man waits by a light with a sign about autism awareness. I have occasionally stopped to pass him a water bottle or a towel but I have never asked his name.

Now, the problem of homelessness in America will not be solved by a single sermon. As Christians we have many duties to the poor, the unhoused, the sick, and the needy. We must mobilize our time and our resources accordingly, and there are many organizations in our community that do great work for the children of God. I would take this moment to specifically commend the Lamb Center, with which Good Shepherd has done work in the past, and to commend the ongoing work of our FACETs volunteers.

But it is impossible for me to recall these individuals without thinking of today’s parable. The Rich Man and Lazarus, with its scenes of hellfire and torment, is an uncomfortable read. But when something in the Bible makes us uncomfortable I take it as a rule that we must listen. And when the source of that discomfort is Jesus himself, we must let down our guard and listen with all of our heart and soul and mind.

Of all Jesus’s parables, this is the most vivid. The Rich Man is well-off. He dresses in fine clothes and eats sumptuously every day. Meanwhile the beggar Lazarus lies at the rich

man's gate, covered in sores, yearning for the scraps off the rich man's table while dogs lick up the puss from his sores.

The Rich Man does not even seem to notice Lazarus's existence until they both die and their situations are reversed—Lazarus's suffering ends and he rests in the bosom of Abraham while the rich man suffers torment in Hades.

I've always found it remarkable that even in the torment of Hades the rich man maintains his blithe self-centeredness. He thinks that he's in a position to ask favors of Abraham. He thinks he can exert some level of control. He even thinks he can tear Lazarus away from his comfort with Abraham, first to comfort him in his own torment and then to run a message back to his still living family.

In other words, Lazarus never existed to the rich man, not really. Not when he was lying desperately at his gate and not even on the other side of life's veil. He was not a person, just a thing, first to be ignored and then to be exploited when it suited the rich man's needs. This tells us all we need to know about this man and his attitude towards the world. It was not only his inaction towards Lazarus that brought him into Hades. It was his entire way of engaging with the world around him.

Jesus is not telling this parable in a vacuum. Again and again in the Gospel of Luke he has told parables of redemption and forgiveness. His audience is full of both rich and poor, and within this parable lies a warning: redemption and forgiveness are impossible if one cannot acknowledge that they have anything to repent of.

So often in our culture, either directly or indirectly, we are told that good fortune comes to good people and bad fortune comes to bad people. Anyone who has lived any sort of real life knows that this is preposterous. But this myth persists. So often our excuse for inaction is to tell ourselves that other people's suffering is none of our business. Their problem, not mine.

The message of the parable is that all of humanity is our business because all of humanity is beloved by God—and it is through love of our neighbor that we experience the love of God.

The Church has always had a fraught relationship with what it means to serve God in this world. Again and again Jesus reminds us, as he did last week, that "You cannot serve God and wealth." Yet even a casual glance over the history of the church reminds us of times when clergy and other church authorities acted as if it were indeed possible to serve God and wealth, and failing that then wealth (being the more tangible of the two, at least according to the values of this world) is the preferable option.

The Church has made great mistakes in her history, but to follow the way of Jesus she must never stand aside like an established society, and embrace indifference to the many sufferings and injustices of this world. The Rich Man's sin was not his wealth but the indifference that wealth fostered in his heart. Indifference that only passed when it was to his benefit, and by then it was too late.

The Rich Man's sin was not his wealth. He was not serving wealth, only his own appetites. A pennypinching miser may be greedy but he at least understands the value of money and acts accordingly, denying himself just as much as he denies others. The wealth contributed to the rich man's selfishness, insulating him from the cares of the world so well that he did not even notice Lazarus outside his gate. In life he had no need for God—all of his needs are taken care of and he wanted for nothing. He thought only of himself, and now himself is all he will ever have.

It is not a sin to seek material security, to look after the welfare of our families and seek just compensation for our work. Everyone in the Bible does the same. Abraham, by the standards of ancient times, died a wealthy man, as did his descendants. Sin creeps in when we become indifferent, indifferent to the world around us, numbed to the pain of others and concerned only with fulfilling our own cravings and appetites.

We all make mistakes. We fail. Again and again catch ourselves in moments of selfishness and indifference and so we turn to God for forgiveness and restoration. Look at the world through the eyes of God, seeking to do good, seeking to live more fully and beautifully, loving our neighbor as ourselves.

And may God open our hearts to the needs of those around us, so that on the last day the Lord may say to us all: "I was hungry and you fed me, naked and you clothed me, thirsty and you gave me drink."

To comfort the grieving and bring hope to the despairing, seeking fellowship with those the princes of this world hold of no account—this is true religion.