

Sermon: Lazarus in our Midst
Luke 16:19-31
16 Pentecost, Year C

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When I moved to Staunton 18 years ago I met an Episcopal woman. She had life and great pride in her church and let me know that she was a 3rd generation Episcopalian. She even knew the church in Tidewater, Virginia where her family's journey began. As a mutt-on-the-margins I was quite impressed. I grew up as man without a faith pedigree. My family toured in and around many denominations. I had no idea that through the nudging of the Holy Spirit I would be here with you today as a minted Episcopalian with a heart for this church and this tradition in the collective body of Christ. I also had no idea I would be discerning a call to ordained ministry or that this call would be discerning me. It is an honor to be here today.

Our study today is on a parable from Luke; the story of the leper Lazarus, the wealthy man donned in purple, the gate between them, their deaths and a new restored order.

I don't know what gets your attention with this parable but I am haunted by Lazarus. It is the image of the dogs licking his open sores. "Even the dogs would lick his open sores." I am transported back to when I was a young man, ten years old in Mississippi to the Pentecostal Church my mom, brother and I attended. There was a foul, sick smell coming from around the corner. I looked up to see my Lazarus, a man named Steve who had some ailment where his tongue was at least ten times the normal size. It spilled from his mouth and I clearly remember seeing this man for the first time. I did not gawk or point. I wanted to cry. Even at ten, I was heartbroken. I wanted to know why Steve had to endure this great pain and what was I to do? I think of Steve. I think of the poverty of Lazarus. The passage says Lazarus "longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table." This sounds kind of benign but I read an online commentary that said this:

"At banquets people wipe grease from their hands onto a piece of bread and then throw the bread on the floor. To long for such soiled bread is the height of misery-of degradation." ⁱ

What do we do? How are we to respond to these encounters? To Lazarus' profound poverty? To those who are without personal boundaries, disordered by circumstance and stripped of dignity? How are we to encounter the suffering of the world and not suffer emotional and spiritual paralysis?

Thank God for spiritual directors like Thomas Merton, who told the 18 year old James Finley when Finley entered Gethsemane Abbey Trappist monastery that:

"We did not come to this monastery to breathe a rarefied air beyond the suffering of this world. We came here to experience the suffering of the whole world in our hearts. That's why we are here." ⁱⁱ James Finley goes on to say the only way to encounter this suffering is by pursuing God's peace, a peace that surpasses all understanding. Finley shares, "We seek this peace, we've tasted this peace, and we seek this peace in prayer and meditation. We lean into it, to be grounded in this unexplainable oneness. Not that we might flee from the suffering of the world, but rather be present to the suffering of the world with our hear anchored in peace. It doesn't take the suffering away. It gives us the courage and the strength and the groundedness to be present to the suffering"

Remember, we do not come to Christ for guaranteed safety. We are not at ease in Zion. But we are pursuing the ground of peace.

Does your practice of prayer and meditation anchor you to peace? Can we take the path of the cross and lose to win, die to be reborn on a daily basis? Can we see this as our lineage to one “Catholic and Apostolic Church?” Are we seeking a life experience, a faith experience that is timeless or timely?

I almost don't want to go there but I see a parables much like dreams. In dream interpretation the dreamer is all parts of the dream. Taking that approach, we are Lazarus. We have our great suffering. We are also the man donned in fine linen and purple. We are his piety, pride, pretense and privilege. We want things. We want our gratification now. We try to live in the “good” part of town, behind gates, in gated communities and we live in a country surrounded by gates. We step over those that suffer in our midst. We want the homeless to be invisible. We secretly want the prosperity gospel that is lived by this person in purple. He has bent the texts to see the lepers of the world as unclean and the wealthy and privileged as righteous and worthy.

We long for miracles, for lottery ticket winners, for someone to rise from the dead, while what really sustains, lives in and all around us. What we long for lives in the prophets. What we long for lives in the path of the cross. What we long for lives in a life seeking God's peace through daily prayer, meditation and encounter.

What can we each do to make and cultivate time grounded in God open to the stirrings of the Holy Spirit? I ask this question as a fellow seeker that is too busy and often too timely. May we all be thankful for Grace and that our journey on this beautiful day is not yet finished. May we always be arriving and continue in our commitment to one another in this Christian community.
Amen.

ⁱ Sermonwriter.com Luke 16:19-31

ⁱⁱ Cac.org