

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman
Christ Church, Tarrytown – September 29, 2013
Text: Luke 16:19–31

Your rector and I are leaving this afternoon for the beach for two glorious days. We're meeting up in Ocean Grove, NJ with Louise and Jeanne – all of us friends since the early 1980s when we met at Grace Episcopal Church in Manhattan and were in a prayer group together. The young adult population at Grace Church at that time was pretty extraordinary. Dozens of us in our 20s and early 30s had come to New York to begin or continue our professional lives. We were drawn to Grace Church by the beauty of the place, the liturgy, the music, the preaching, the teaching, and the fellowship. We stayed because of the theology of radical grace that infused everything that happened there.

That theology can be summed up in one sentence from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, chapter 2, verse 8: "By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast." In other words, there is nothing that we can ever do to earn a place in the Kingdom of God. It's ours and always will be simply because of God's love for us, as manifested in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. And, there is nothing that we can ever do that will diminish or decrease God's love for us one bit. Ever.

That was good news to us then; it's good news now. As theologian Richard Rohr writes, "Grace is God's magnificent release from our self-made prisons, and [it's] the only way that God's economy can triumph over our deeply internalized merit badge system."*

If this is true – that what we do or don't do has no bearing on God's eternal love for us, then what do we make of today's Gospel text? Jesus tells a parable about an unnamed rich man who had lived abundantly, and a poor man named Lazarus who had lain hungry at the gate of the rich man's home. Both die. Lazarus is carried off by angels to be with Abraham, while the rich man lands in Hades – a place of torment.

Now, the rich man is the one who's suffering. And because he is, he asks for just a little bit of help from Abraham – that Abraham would send Lazarus to him so that Lazarus might dip the tip of his finger in water and cool the rich man's tongue, because he's in agony. But Abraham refuses his request, reminding him that he was more than comfortable in a life of abundance before he died, and that Lazarus lived in poverty. The text

doesn't explicitly say so, but our assumption is that the rich man was fully aware of Lazarus' need, because if the rich man knew Lazarus' name, he must have known of his situation as well. And he apparently did nothing to help.

So the rich man lived well and ignored the needs of the poor man during his lifetime. Because of what he did, and because of what he didn't do, the rich man is condemned to the flames of Hades instead of resting in the bosom of Abraham, like Lazarus. That sounds like a merit badge system to me. Doesn't it seem that in this story, salvation is earned? Doesn't that seem to contradict the message of radical grace?

We need to remember that Jesus' parables aren't summaries of systematic theology. And, as one commentator writes, they're parables, not predictions.** They're stories he told, in response to specific situations that were meant to give his hearers a surprising and sometimes unsettling glimpse into the way God works. While it's natural for us to associate the afterlife described in this story as "heaven" for Lazarus and "hell" for the rich man, it doesn't say that. I think the only thing that's actually relevant about the reference to the afterlife in this story is that by that time, it's simply too late for Lazarus and the rich man to engage with each other.

We also need to remember that "salvation" doesn't only mean life with God after death. In fact, most of the time that the words "salvation" or "saved" are used in the New Testament, it's not about heaven or the afterlife. Marcus Borg writes that "salvation" in the Bible refers to: liberation from what enslaves us; return from exile; rescue from peril; going from blindness to sight; going from death to life; from infirmity to well-being; from fear to trust; from violence to non-violence.***

We also need to remember that our responsibility to care for the poor is one of the most frequent themes of Scripture, whether in the Old Testament or the New. From Moses to the prophets to Jesus to the early church, our sacred text stresses God's constant compassion and care for the poor.

So - she asks again - what do we do with this parable? Let's try this: Some of the Pharisees with whom Jesus had been in conversation were ignoring the needs of the poor in their community, just as the rich man in the story had been ignoring the needs of Lazarus. Jesus knew that the Pharisees could experience God's salvation in their daily life by caring for the poor, and he wanted that salvation for them. In their earthly life, they

had the chance to to be saved – to return from the exile of self-centeredness to the joyous freedom of generosity. They could have had their sight restored – from seeing only themselves and their own need to seeing others with a clarity they'd never known before.

A few weeks ago, Larry and I were in Chicago visiting our son and daughter-in-law. One day when Keene and Kristin were at work, we spent a few hours at the Art Institute. I was ready to leave before Larry was, so we arranged to meet in the park-like space near the main entrance of the museum.

I was peacefully reading a book on a bench in the shade when a man who was obviously in need approached me, and asked politely for some money to buy food. Lots of people say that it just enables unhealthy behavior to give someone cash. That may be true. But I didn't have the energy to find a deli and walk with him there to buy him a sandwich. I intended to give him \$5, but I didn't have anything smaller than a \$20 bill. I gave him the \$20. He looked at it in disbelief, then grinned at me and started jumping up and down. Then he threw his arms around me, thanking me over and over again. His excitement was real, and I wasn't in any danger. While the chasm between his life circumstances and mine was huge and deep, this was a brief, unlikely connection that was life giving to both of us.

And then he sat down to chat. And I wasn't open to that. I wanted to help, but I didn't really want to see him as a person like me. I didn't ask him his name. I wanted to read my book in peace and quiet.

He got the message; apologized for possibly scaring me by being so enthusiastic, and left. I had had a glimpse of God's salvation in my earthly life when I shared my resources with him. And I missed another glimpse or two of God's saving grace when I didn't let myself really see him.

I believe that God loves me – loves each one of us – unconditionally, and that my giving that man the \$20 didn't increase my favor with God any more than not carrying on a conversation with that same man lessened God's love for me in any way. God's graceful love is constant and eternal, in this life and in the life to come, regardless of who I am and regardless of what I have or haven't done. God loves us madly. Always.

And, God offers me – offers each one of us – experiences of salvation every single day by inviting me to engage with those who have less than I

do – by participating in their lives both by sharing resources and by sharing a bit of our stories. Those experiences will give me life – here and now.

Here's how I think God may be speaking to me through this story of the rich man who didn't see Lazarus in his earthly life: I need and want God to save me from my self-centeredness every day. I believe God is inviting me, in addition to writing checks to fulfill my pledge to Christ Church and supporting organizations that work to end poverty, to make a conscious decision every single day to give away some amount that I spend on myself. When Susan, Louise, Jeanne and I eat together tonight, I can put aside the same amount I'll spend on my bucket of steamers so that someone in need can also eat dinner.

And I believe that God is inviting me to really see those in need as God's beloved, just as I am. The next time someone gathers the courage to ask me for help, I can first respond by asking his or her name, and offering mine.

Will you encourage me in this acknowledgement of and invitation into God's salvation in my everyday life? Might you join me? Amen.

* From A Lever and a Place to Stand: The Contemplative Stance, The Active Prayer (CD)

** From On Stretching Parables by David Lose, via Textweek.com

*** From Speaking Christian, pp. 38–50