



Hunger, Hades and Hope

TEXT
Luke 16:19–31

July 31, 2016 — Sermon by Rev. Jenny McDevitt

Well, aren't you glad you came to worship this morning? Here it is, still the weekend, and you have gone through the trouble of changing out of your pajamas, making coffee, eating breakfast, finding the car keys and driving all the way over here — most likely passing at least three Starbucks and a park full of swing sets and grassy fields. You have set aside *The New York Times* or *The Wall Street Journal* or the Cartoon Network; you have resisted the temptation to worship at the table of the Holy Sunday Brunch Hour, all to come here to Village Presbyterian Church for us to read you a story about a hungry man and the flames of hell and unending torment. Great!

If there are visitors among us, welcome! So glad you're here. I promise, we don't always talk about stuff like this; and for what it's worth, it's Luke's fault we're doing it this morning. Well, either Luke or Tom Are, and it's easier to blame an ancient dead gospel writer ... and it's safer for me not to blame my boss. So yes, it's entirely Luke's fault we're talking about this today.

That begs the question: What on earth was Luke thinking? He's

the only one who tells this story. Matthew, Mark and John — they seem to have instinctively understood that if you are in the business of trying to convince people to follow Jesus, this story does not seem to help your case.

It's rough going. Here's how it begins: "Let me tell you a story," Jesus says. That, by the way, that phrase? When Jesus says "Let me tell you a story," it's kind of Bible code for "It's about to get real weird in here." "Let me tell you a story," he says. Once upon a time, there was a rich guy. This rich guy dresses in purple every day. Only the rich dress in purple; of all the dyes out there in the ancient world, purple was by far the most expensive. He dresses in purple every day and feasts extravagantly every day. Meanwhile, here's what else happens every day: A poor guy named Lazarus, who is starving to death and covered in sores and licked by dogs sits outside the rich man's gate every day. That's all we hear about their lives — because the next we know, Jesus tells us that both men die.

Now Lazarus? The angels come for him, and he is taken away to heaven where he is greeted by none other than Abraham himself. The rich man? He's taken to Hades, where he is *tor-*

mented. That word in the Greek, *basanois*, is the same word that is used to describe the torture that was inflicted upon soldiers or prisoners in order to make them give up sensitive information. If you are in the midst of *basanois*, you're having about as bad a day as anyone can have. And it's in the midst of that kind of suffering that the rich man looks up and sees Abraham and Lazarus — far away, but within sight. So he calls out, "Abraham, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to bring me some cool water; 'cause in case you haven't noticed, I'm burnin' up over here."

And Abraham says, "No." "No," he says, "because hey, remember how you lived? You had all sorts of good things, and Lazarus had nothing ... so now he is the one in paradise, and you are the one in agony. This is how it will be now. Don't even try to bargain. There's nothing you can do now to change it."

And the rich man says, "OK, fine, if there is no hope for me, so be it. But please, go and warn my family, so that they might have a chance to escape this fiery fate."

And once again, Abraham says "No." "No," he says, "they've got Moses and the

prophets. They should listen to them.”

“Please,” the rich man begs, “if you go to them, they will listen to you.”

And for the last time, Abraham — Abraham, the father of all the nations — says that devastating word once again: “No.” “No,” he says, “there is nothing I can do.” And there the story ends.

The southern fiction writer Flannery O’Connor is known for having created some of the most grotesque characters in literary history. Not vampires or monsters, mind you — just regular humans like you and me, at the very depths of their worst selves. She writes stories that are brilliant and complex, and she writes stories that I cannot read before bed because they haunt me. She was asked once why she wrote such outrageous things, and here’s what she said. She said, “To the hard of hearing, you shout, and to the almost blind, you draw large, startling figures.”

I think that’s why Jesus tells this story, and I think that’s why Luke tells us that Jesus tells this story. He’s shouting and drawing and jumping and doing anything he can to get our attention — because this *matters*. And don’t miss this: What matters so much in this story is not related to our address in the afterlife. In fact, the more time I sit with this story, the more I am convinced it has absolutely nothing to do with what happens to us after we die. I think it has a whole lot to do with who we see, and how we see them, while we are alive.

Look at the story again. The first time the rich man sees Laza-

rus is after they are both already dead. The rich man does not see the poor man when everything is smooth sailing in life. The rich man sees him, finally, and only when he is suddenly the one in need. “The rich man looked up,” the Bible tells us, “he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side.” Up until that point, though their paths crossed every day, the rich man looked right past him. The rich man’s sin wasn’t the fact that he was rich. There’s no direct critique of his wealth in this story. And his sin wasn’t that he was cruel to Lazarus. It wasn’t that he looked Lazarus in the eyes and said, “No, I will not share what I have with you.” His sin was that he never looked at Lazarus at all.

Do you remember what Elie Wiesel once said? Having survived the Holocaust, this was his observation. He said: “The opposite of love is not hate; it’s indifference. The opposite of beauty is not ugliness; it’s indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy; it’s indifference. And the opposite of life is not death; it’s indifference.”

And here’s the thing: Indifference is the by-product of a lack of imagination. We simply have to be able to imagine lives that are not our own. Because imagination is not just one of the things that makes us Christian; it’s one of the things that makes us human. When we stop imagining, our world gets very small.¹

Here’s something of what I mean by that. Shortly after I moved into my house in Westwood, I discovered a detail that had not shown up on any of the

mortgage paperwork I signed: My street really enjoys outdoor decorating in the holiday seasons, and the holiday season starts with the fall harvest. I was unprepared for this. I love Christmas lights, but I was unaccustomed to being surrounded by scarecrows and gourds and cornucopias that popped up on every porch on October 1.

Now if I were a more mature sort of individual, if I were more evolved as a human being, it is possible that this would not have bothered me in the slightest. It is possible that I would have found it all quite lovely. But when it comes to these sorts of things, I am apparently neither mature nor evolved. I didn’t go to the store and buy some decorations. That would be too easy. No, I went to the crazy place in my brain and developed a complex. “You are the only one with nothing in the yard,” I told myself. “Your new neighbors must think you are such a letdown. They probably wish someone else — someone with mums and corn and a scarecrow — had moved in.” And then one day, as Halloween crept closer, a beautiful, orange pumpkin showed up on my porch.

I’ve already told you I had gone to the crazy place; I’m going to need you to keep that in mind. I saw the pumpkin as I pulled into my driveway that evening, and I thought, “Well, that’s just *great*. The neighbors are so tired of waiting on me to decorate, they’ve taken matters into their own hands.” I resented everything about that pumpkin. I left it on the porch, but every time I saw it, it reminded me

what a failure of a homeowner I was. I started referring to it as the Pumpkin of Judgment. I took silent bets about which of my neighbors had delivered it.

It was just a few days before Halloween when a church member came by my house. It was Lexa Carr. We were standing outside in my yard, and she said, “How do you like your pumpkin?” That was all I needed.

“You are never going to believe this,” I told her, and I filled her in with all the gory details about the Pumpkin of Judgment. As I was talking, I didn’t immediately realize how still she had become. Finally, after a long, uncomfortable moment of silence, I looked at her. “You left the pumpkin for me, didn’t you?”

“I did,” she said. “I just wanted you to know I was thinking about you.”

“Oh.”

So here’s the thing. That’s a ridiculous story. It’s a ridiculous story, but it points toward something important. Throughout that entire ordeal, I lacked the holy imagination this world so desperately needs. I simply could not imagine any other scenario beyond my own observations, and that meant that not only did I not see my neighbors rightly, I didn’t see Lexa at all. All I could see was a world that revolved entirely around me, where my neighbors had nothing better to think about than me and my house.

I saw a lot. I just didn’t see the real things, the important things, like the kindness of Lexa, or the exhaustion of the couple with three small children, or

the medication delivered to the single woman on the corner, or the elderly parent that lived with the couple across the street — because at that point, I hadn’t even had time to get to know my neighbors. I didn’t see them.

Bryan Stevenson, in his book *Just Mercy*, talks a lot about his experiences with incarcerated people and his experiences with the criminal justice system. It is a remarkable read. Along the way, he relays the story of his grandmother. She was the daughter of people who were enslaved in Virginia. Her father talked to her all the time about growing up in slavery — and that legacy shaped her and the way she raised her own children and grandchildren.

She developed a habit of constantly telling Bryan and the others to “keep close.” He writes: “When I visited her, she would hug me so tightly I could barely breathe. After a little while, she would ask me, ‘Bryan, do you still feel me hugging you?’ If I said yes, she’d let me be. If I said no, she would assault me again. I said no a lot because it made me happy to be wrapped in her formidable arms. She never tired of pulling me to her. ‘You can’t understand most of the important things from a distance,’ she would often say. ‘Remember that, Bryan. You have to get close.’”²

I wonder if getting close to one another is what will wake up our imagination; if getting close to one another is how we will start seeing each other, how we will start wondering what it’s like to live a life other than our own. And I trust you understand

that “getting close” isn’t just about physical, interpersonal proximity. Lazarus and the rich man were only separated by a gate and a table, but all of Hades stood between them.

You know, the more I study this story, the more I can’t help but wonder: Who are the people that sit at our gates, every day, waiting for us to see them?

Just this past Wednesday, all the remaining charges against police officers accused in the arrest and death of Freddie Gray were dropped in Baltimore. It was the final chapter in a high profile case, another reminder of all the black lives that have come to violent ends this summer. And it was just 10 days ago that Charles Kinsey, another black man, was shot by a police officer in North Miami. He lay down on the ground, with his legs spread and his arms up in the air, and even still, he was shot. “Why did you shoot me?” he asked, and the officer replied — this reply stuns me — “I don’t know.”

We are lacking the holy imagination it takes to see lives that are not our own. We have seen that played out altogether too much in recent days, with black lives and Muslim lives and LGBTQ lives and immigrant lives. And while, of course, each and every life is precious to the God who created us, recent history declares it a fact that some lives are easy to see and other lives are pretty darn invisible.

As best I can tell, the story of Lazarus and the rich man suggests those lives, the lives that still need desperately to be seen, are the ones we need to keep

closest to, the lives we need to imagine with compassion and kindness and humanity.

This story isn't about what happens to us after we die. This story is about helping us understand how we are to live. So I suppose it's fair to ask: How do we do it? How do we really get close? How do we expand our imaginations enough to really see each other? What's that look like, in a way that will actually mean something or impact lives?

That answer is in the story itself too. Remember when the rich man tries to bargain with Abraham for his brothers' lives? "OK, forget about me," he says, "but go to them and tell them to live differently."

And Abraham says, "No." "No," he says, "they have Moses and the prophets."

The rich man tries again. "Please," he says, "if you go to them, they will listen to you."

"No," he says, "there is nothing else I can do." I think here we need to make an interpretive choice. We can decide that Abraham is saying there is no redemption for them. It is too late. As far as they are concerned, all is lost. That's a possibility. But I think there's another, better option. I think we can decide that Abraham is saying they have Moses and the prophets — they have scripture — which means they already have all the answers they need ... which means hope is still very much alive.

Friends, we know what scripture tells us: Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the prisoner, welcome the stranger, shelter the alien, touch the sick, comfort

the grieving, "keep close" to all those in need.

It's true that following Jesus has always been about more than this. But at the same time, following Jesus cannot be about anything less than this. If we cannot manage to see the very basics of humanity, chances are that we'll lose our credibility as people who claim to know anything about divinity.

This story Jesus tells? It's deeply uncomfortable. Thanks be to God — because we live in a deeply uncomfortable world. Stories like these? They are essential. They are not a threat. In fact, just the opposite: They are hope, sturdy hope, hope that has withstood the test of time and endured the entirety of human history — our best and our worst. These stories offer us a way through. They help us realize we have all the answers we need, if only we will learn how to see them.

May these words from the poet Naomi Shihab Nye serve as our prayer today:

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,

you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.

You must wake up with sorrow.

You must speak to it until your voice

catches the thread of all sorrows

and you see the size of the cloth.

Then, it is only kindness that will make sense anymore,

only kindness that will tie your shoes

and send you out into the day

to gaze at bread,

only kindness that will raise its head

from the crowd of the world to say,

You are the one I have been looking for,

and then go along with you everywhere,

like a shadow or a friend.³

May it be so! Amen.

¹These thoughts are informed by Wendell Berry's novel *Hannah Coulter*.

²Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy*, p. 14.

³*Kindness*, by Naomi Shihab Nye, accessed via http://www.onbeing.org/program/naomi-shihab-nye-your-life-is-a-poem/transcript/8850#main_content

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The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.