

Rev. Mike Cole
Providence Presbyterian Church
Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 28, 2025
Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16; Luke 16:19-31

"Closing the Gap"

I have a friend who visited her doctor and asked, "Is it true that I will be taking the medication you prescribed for me the rest of my life?" "Yes, it is," replied the doctor. "I'm wondering then," she said, "just how serious my condition is, because the prescription is marked, 'No Refills.'"

We just never know how serious our condition is because we don't know what kind of time God has allotted to us. There is no doubt that we put things off as if we had all the time in the world, but the truth is that none of us knows the day or the hour when we will be "rehomed" to eternity.

Today's parable from Luke reminds us of the importance of getting our priorities straight before it is too late. The main characters in the parable are a rich man and Lazarus (not to be confused with Jesus' real life friend, Lazarus). The rich man, who is unnamed in the parable, lives a lavish lifestyle. He is part of the Israeli "jet set." He wears Armani suits and thousand-dollar Italian shoes. His chef prepares meals fit for royalty every night. He lives in an estate surrounded by a brick wall outfitted with all the latest electronic surveillance equipment. His fifteen thousand square foot home has been featured on the cover of Architectural Digest, and boasts an indoor pool, marble floors, and gold fixtures. It is a house "to die for" which, as it turns out, is exactly what the rich man ends up doing.

Meanwhile, at the gate of the rich man's estate, lies Lazarus. Homeless and hopeless, he lays there day after day seeking a handout. We know this Lazarus. We've seen him all around town - standing on a street corner with one of those "Will work for food" signs; camped in some bushes in a park; or looking for work at Home Depot. Jesus was right - the poor we always have with us.

Lazarus is one of the destitute millions who are hapless, hopeless, and helpless. Not only is he poor as a synagogue mouse, but he is also deathly ill, covered with sores through which his life oozes away.

Jesus doesn't characterize the rich man as particularly evil, nor does he idealize Lazarus.

Lazarus is named and the rich man is not, which is quite a contrast to our world where the rich and famous are household names and the poor live and die in nameless anonymity. The rich man's worst crime, apparently, is that he ignores Lazarus who is at his gate. The rich man is so accustomed to seeing Lazarus that Lazarus has become invisible to him. He doesn't even need the heavily tinted windows on his Mercedes to obscure Lazarus from his view. He really doesn't see him.

And that's a danger for us as well, that our material possessions will so insulate us from those who are in need that we'll be able to ignore them. The poor lie at the gates of our homes, our neighborhoods, and our nation. We don't need statistical studies to convince us of that. We see them every day. We would just rather ignore them.

Even though the '80's and 90's were tagged the "era of self-indulgence," I haven't seen anything in society to indicate that we have matured beyond that. We are still self-absorbed and heaven-bent on satisfying our every whim. The difficulty is that the more we have, the more detached we become from those who have not. It's usually not a calculated move. We simply get sucked into new priorities. So, brick by brick, we build walls between our comfortable worlds and the struggles of those outside or we ship them off to some other country just to get them out of our hair.

The first time I saw a homeless person, I was about seven years old. My friends and I were playing near the railroad tracks in our neighborhood when a passing train slowed to a stop. Inside one of the boxcars was a man - dirty and unkempt - who stared blankly out at us. He scared all of us. So we ran away. Which is, perhaps, what most of us are still doing. In the words of our confession this morning: "We walk away from neighbors in need, wrapped up in our own concerns." Our focus shifts from people to things. And pretty soon, like the rich man in Jesus' parable, we don't even see Lazarus lying in pain at our gates.

Since this is a Bible story, we might expect the rich man to change his ways, if not in this life, then at least in the afterlife. We want him to become a more sensitive person and respond according to the words of the prophet Micah: "To do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God." We want to hear him apologize to Lazarus and offer to house, clothe, and feed him. We want that because the rich man is us. We want some assurance that all is not lost because of our insensitivity to the plight of the poor. We want the story to demonstrate that changes in attitude do happen and that the rich man's soul is still salvageable. We want a happy ending to the parable.

But that's not the way Jesus concluded this parable. Both the rich man and Lazarus die, but they face very different fates in eternal life. Lazarus ascends into heaven, whereas the rich man descends into hell. While there was a gap between the two men in this life, now,

there is a veritable chasm, a yawning canyon between them in the afterlife. But has anything else changed? Let's see.

With flames dancing all around him, the rich man barks out an order to Abraham, the father of Israel: "Have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue." Do you hear it in his tone? Once a bully, always a bully. Not even the torment of Hades has tempered this man's pride. He even thinks he can order Abraham around.

Ignoring the man's haughty tone, Abraham responds, "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony." Abraham simply states the facts to the rich man, saying, essentially, "You had your chance to bridge the gap in your lifetime. Now it is too late. You are where you deserve to be because you chose not to share out of your abundance."

Does this speech shake up the rich man? Only slightly. Realizing that it is too late for him, he appeals to Abraham to use Lazarus as an errand boy to warn his five brothers of the fate that awaits them if they do not change their attitude toward the poor. Notice that he doesn't ask Lazarus to warn the whole world, but only his family. He is still self-absorbed.

Little has changed for him - he is still as self-concerned in hell as he was on earth, which may be his eternal punishment - being eternally self-preoccupied. I cannot think of a more boring way to spend eternity. This parable is not about how to earn our way into heaven, nor is it about the evils of wealth. This is a parable about how we use what we have and what that attitude portends for our future.

Through the parable, Jesus warns us not to be deceived that there is plenty of time to amend our ways and change our attitude toward sharing our bounty with those who are in need. The truth of the matter is that it may be later than we think and the attitude we now have may be the attitude we will be stuck with for eternity. Doesn't it make sense to begin altering that attitude now? But what's it going to take? It's going to take a radical shift in our orientation from self to others. It's going to take risking ourselves for others.

As a congregation we already support mission – The Parker Task Force, Team Zimbabwe, Presbytery mission, and special offerings for One Great Hour of Sharing and the Christmas Joy Offering. Our members are involved in all sorts of mission work on a voluntary basis – the senior citizen center, CASA, Step 7 and many other ways of serving others.

Some time ago I read a story about John. He had wild hair and wore a T-shirt with holes in it, dirty jeans and ragged shoes. John had become a Christian while attending college

through a campus ministry. But that was years before and John was out of work and out of luck.

One day, John decided that it was time to go back to church. The one he chose was right downtown - very wealthy and very conservative. He walked in with no shoes, jeans, his T-shirt, and wild hair. The service had already started, so John ushered himself down the aisle looking for a seat. But the church was completely packed and he couldn't find a seat.

By this time, people were staring and growing uncomfortable, but no one said anything.

John got all the way to the front when he realized there were no seats available, so he squatted down right on the center aisle carpet. You can just imagine that by this time, the people were really uptight, and the tension was palpable.

Just then, an elder in the church began to make his way from the back of the church toward John. This was an experienced elder in his eighties, with silver-gray hair, a three piece suit and a gold pocket watch. He was a godly, elegant, dignified man.

Everyone was thinking to themselves, "You can't blame him for what he's going to do.

After all, this fellow has disrupted our worship." It took the man a while to reach John, sitting cross-legged on the red carpet. The church was utterly silent except for the thumping of the man's cane. All eyes were focused on him. Everyone held their breath and thought, "The pastor can't even preach until the elder does what he has to do."

When the elder reached John, he dropped his cane and then, with great difficulty, lowered himself to sit beside John so John wouldn't be alone in worship. At this point, the pastor said, "What I was about to preach you will never remember. What you have just seen, you will never forget."

That's what it takes to move us beyond self-absorption - risking who we are and what we have to help reverse the misfortune of others. It takes open hearts and minds. It takes willing spirits and helping hands. It takes clarity of vision to see who lays at our gates and steadfast resolve to treat them as children of God and close the gap between us and our neighbors who are perhaps less fortunate in worldly things but loved by God just like us.

That's what it takes to move us beyond self-absorption and into compassionate caring for others. Seeing – really seeing the Lazarus's laying at our gates and reaching out a helping hand to close the gap between us and whoever God has called us to serve.

In a few weeks we will begin our annual stewardship campaign. We will be asking everyone (including me) to make a pledge of financial commitment to our church, which will help us serve others and close the gap between us and those in need. Closing the gap is not just about reducing the distance between us and those in need; it is also about closing the gap between us and God. So, what are you going to do to close the gap?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Charge: Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God will equip you. God will accomplish a purpose in your being there. Christ who dwells within you has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in God's grace, love and power. Amen