

Providence Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. David Pettit
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Luke 16: 19-31

What does it mean to have a soft heart? Growing up in a house of four boys and where we were reared to work hard, to be soft was not a complement. As brothers we might taunt each other with soft as an insult. To be soft was to get tired, or to get hurt easily, or to give up, or to be sensitive, or to cry. You didn't want to be soft. You wanted to be strong, tough, have endurance.

But in a tradition where we follow Jesus, and take quite seriously his example and his words, in a tradition where love is the highest standard, where God is characterized as love, where we are called upon to be kind and compassionate, where the fruit of the Spirit working in us is love and joy, peace and patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. In a tradition where proclaiming our need for Christ is not a weakness but a strength, our need for forgiveness and renewal is not a weakness but a strength – in such a tradition, what does it mean to be soft, and soft-hearted?

I think to be soft is to be cognizant of what others miss, to be affected by what others are hardened to, to be humble when others are prideful and defensive, to be willing to learn when others want to proclaim that they are right. To be open to change. To be capable of great emotion and compassion, love and joy, empathy and transformation.

Each of the passages we will look at over the next month or so, all following along in Luke's gospel, reward the soft of heart, encourage us to be soft of heart, to be moved with compassion, to be moved with gratitude and humble repentance, and with a desire to start anew. I would suggest to be soft is a virtue, not a weakness or an insult. And in a culture where we tend to have hardened attitudes and political views that portray others harshly, to be soft of heart is indeed a virtue.

Now to suggest we need soft hearts implies that we are prone to a hardness of heart. And to be hard of heart, or to be callous and unmoved when we ought to be moved is not to suggest we are monsters, some aggravated and aggressive jerks, though we shouldn't rule out that possibility. But often hardness presents much more subtly than that. Often it is a product of our being carried along by what is accepted, by what is the norm. I love our poem for this, the way it presents this little family environment. There is no purposeful harm, no ill-will, no conscious sinister scheme at play, and yet it is marked by difference and separation and a lack

of inclusion or communication. The power balances will shift as the poem progresses, but the divides only become more noticeable, at least for some. It wasn't that they tried to exclude, but the feeling and emotion of exclusion grows nonetheless.

Our gospel reading tells of a divide as well, between two people who existed in close proximity but their relationship could also be characterized by difference and separation, by a lack of empathy, inclusion, and communication. And as this story develops, despite the reversals that happen, that divide seems persistent too. Meaning, the parable ends and nothing seems better, at least in terms of community and connections.

It is a parable. Some interpreters have argued that we should read it more literally saying that it is not a parable. The two strongest reasons that it is not a parable are that 1. Lazarus is named, and normally characters in a parable are more non-descript, such as "the rich man." 2. The foreshadowing of Jesus' rising from the dead is intertwined into the story rather than as a frame to the parable. However, the story proceeds like a parable with its hyperbolic details, its dramatic reversal, its directing all aspects towards a particular perspective. Furthermore, it tells of places and circumstances that no real-life narrator has access to. Why this is important is that we read a parable for its hyperbolized point, to discern a perspective that comes through its stark and dramatic details.

This parable contrasts two people in a hyperbolized style, which highlights the lack of community, a lack of compassion, but also a fragmented and contentious situation. One of the main characters is someone who eats sumptuous food, dresses in fine clothes, lives in a beautiful house, sleeps on the finest of mattresses. This rich man is contrasted with a poor man Lazarus, who was hungry, covered with sores, rags for clothes, who slept at the rich man's gate.

There are a few aspects of this story, and of the poem as well, that illustrate our human tendencies. One is the tendency to be oblivious to the experience of others. Even though we lift up that second greatest commandment of loving our neighbors as ourselves, we have a tendency to not perceive another person's experience very well. The Rich man is not aware or does not bear any empathy to Lazarus, this poor man who is hungry and covered in sores. In the poem, it is the able-bodied family members having a good old time at family gathering, not perceiving what it might feel like to not be able to participate in the conversation, to be relegated to kitchen table.

There is another reality that is illustrated in both, only one party can really make a difference in these divides. In the poem it is the able-bodied ones who are capable of bridging the gap and bringing the deaf family members into the same conversation, onto the same couch. After all, the Deaf members can't learn to hear. But the able bodied can learn to use their hands to talk. "It was a language / the rest of us didn't understand / because we never bothered to learn it." It wasn't that they tried to exclude, but through their lack of perception and empathy, that is what they did. They just never felt the need to learn their language, never thought to take that step to include.

In the parable of Lazarus and the Rich man, Lazarus has done what he can, sitting visibly, being heard and noticed. But he has no cultural capital to make the rich man take him seriously, he cannot make him to stop and listen or connect or help.

Now, there is a reversal in both the poem and in the parable. In the poem, it is gradual. In the parable, it is voiced in the context of eternal judgement. It is the stuff that post-colonial theorists dream of, that our thirst for justice desires, or that our political views may implicate, for the tables to be turned. And in this turning, through the reversal, a couple other human tendencies come to light.

The first is the tendency to perceive another's experience too late. Or put differently, we finally start to relate to others when we have a similar experience. This is one thing I learned when we lost our first child, is that you enter this secret society of people that have lost children, of people that can relate, people who start telling you their stories because they know that now you can hear them. I think it is true for those enduring cancer, or other conditions or experiences. We tend to only relate after we have been through it. It is a reality of our humanity, but one that I often lament – that we can't seem to empathize or perceive unless we've been through it ourselves.

In the parable, they both die and the poor man Lazarus is being comforted in Heaven while the rich man tormented. And what is it that the rich man asks for? He just wants mercy, a little relief, the same thing Lazarus wanted all those years really—a little relief, a little humanity, a little empathy and help. The rich man, now in torment, asks for Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool his tongue. But ironically, now there is an un-moveable chasm that separates them. But the rich man now feels the significance of a little relief when one is suffering. And we, as listeners of the story, see all those years when he could have done something, anything, while the poor man slept by his gate. He could have crossed the chasm when it was still much smaller, but he did not.

In the poem, the able-bodied majority were oblivious to the experiences of the deaf family members who were relegated to the kitchen table to juggle their hands. When the demographics change, all of a sudden, the able-bodied feel threatened, marginalized, and ignored. They now know what it is like to feel excluded and marginalized and they seem worried and threatened by the conversation going on that they are not able to access. The opportunity they once had to cross that boundary has passed, and the chasm only seems to have increased.

The last human tendency that this reversal illustrates is that the ability to connect doesn't improve with the reversal, it actually seems to deepen the divide, or make it more visible and obvious perhaps. Now the reversal is good for some. Lazarus finally gets some relief, the deaf family members finally have a little more community and empowerment. But the ability to bridge gaps has not improved, the level of empathy and connection doesn't seem to improve.

The able-bodied family members in the poem realize that they can't communicate with the deaf family members, and now the deaf family members don't feel the need. The deaf family members don't feel the need to change their way of communicating anymore because they now have the main space, they are directing the main conversation now, and furthermore, it will still require teaching the able-bodied to speak their way, with their hands.

In the parable, the rich man now is pleading for a little compassion, but in the logic of the story, it is too late, the divides are impassable. And furthermore, the rich man still doesn't seem to get it. He now is experiencing a little of what Lazarus knew in his lifetime, but he has not changed his way of viewing Lazarus. So, the rich man offers a solution to Father Abram, speaks out loud a rather embarrassing and revealing solution: if only you could 'send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.' You see, not only did he not offer a little cool water to Lazarus all these years, he now asks that Lazarus would be sent like a servant for him. Lazarus is a resource to be directed.

He still does not treat Lazarus as a person with dignity and will. He still cannot treat him as a brother, as an equal. No, he appeals to father Abraham, to commission Lazarus as a servant against his own will, to come do the rich man's bidding. Lazarus is many things to the rich man – an object, a problem, a commodity, a resource to be directed; but not a brother, not a man who shares his humanity, who shares the image of God.

Both the parable and the poem have unsatisfying endings, but I think that neither the parable nor the poem is satisfied with its ending either. Neither is not aimed at illustrating the right outcome, the correct conclusion, the proper re-shifting of power, wealth, and privilege. The aim of the parable, rather, is that we might perceive differently, and therefore live differently.

Hardness doesn't always present as mean intent. It is often obliviousness to others because of the dynamics at play. Softness is the ability and willingness to perceive and to adjust our way of being. The parable invites us to see the people we pass by contiguously who need a little expression of relief and humanity. The parable presents the issue in terms of economics, class, and privilege. The poem in terms of ability and disability, but we could certainly get the white board out and fill it with other divides as well, other ways we miss each other, to be insensitive to each other, or to speak over each other.

But the parable and the poem both invite us to identify the chasms that we *are* able to address. We are invited to cross the chasms while we still can, so that we can know each other, offer kindness to one another, love one another as neighbors and brothers and sisters. We might have to adjust our patterns to do so, but since Christ left heaven and took on our humanity and became as a servant, obedient even to the point of sacrifice and death, I really don't think we should complain out loud if the worst we have to do is learn to speak with our hands, or some other modification.

The Rich Man and Lazarus

¹⁹ “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰ And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹ who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²² The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³ In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴ He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’ ²⁵ But Abraham said, ‘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. ²⁶ Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’ ²⁷ He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house— ²⁸ for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ ²⁹ Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ ³⁰ He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ ³¹ He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’ ”