

19*“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. 20And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, 21who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. 22The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. 23In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. 24He 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.’ 25But 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. 26Besides 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.’ 27He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house— 28for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ 29Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ 30He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ 31He 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.’”*

They have names. I read their names in the Business section of Friday’s Plain Dealer - billionaires in the United States. In the last year their number has risen from 262 to 313. Every one of them is known – Bill Gates heads the list – Warren Buffet is in second place. I knew those names before I read the article.

But some weeks ago when Cleveland was reported to have the highest percentage of people living in poverty among the large cities in the United States – they were just the poor in my mind - no name at all – just the poor.

In the story Jesus told the opposite is true. He began with the words: *“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores. The poor man longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores.”*

In Jesus’ story the rich man has no name. But the poor man is given a name by Jesus – Lazarus, which means, “God helps”. Now Jesus told this story to Pharisees who scoffed when Jesus said, “A servant cannot serve two masters. He will hate the first master and love the second, or he will be devoted to the first and despise the second. You cannot serve God and wealth.” Luke tells us they scoffed because they were lovers of money.

Jesus tells them a story in which the rich man has no name.

The poor man died and was carried by the angels to be with Abraham. (carried by the angels!) The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away and Lazarus by his side, He called out: *“Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in the water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.”* He knows the name of the poor man – the man he did not feed – did not care for in life. He knows his name and thinks Lazarus exists just to meet the rich man’s needs. In this life that is the place of the poor – to serve the rich – to work in their factories and grow their food and make their clothing – if these poor happened to be living in a developing country their working for little means a bargain for me. I do not give them any more thought than the rich man gave to Lazarus.

But Lazarus’ days of serving the rich man’s needs were over. Abraham said to the rich man, *“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. 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.”*

Would it seem the right thing to do if you were God to take all those people who work twelve and fourteen hour days for a few dollars and give them an easier life in the life to come? If you saw them aging before their time and their children growing up in a harsh life while others grab and grasp the very best, might you be tempted to reverse things in the life to come if you were God? If you were God would you want to share eternity with the sort of people who seeing and knowing the needs of others just keep on accumulating for themselves and their children? Would you?

No wonder the parable speaks of a great chasm, a great divide between those who are comforted by God for all eternity and those whose hardness of heart and meanness of spirit kept them accumulating and accumulating and not sharing.

Then the rich man said, *“Then, Father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house – for I have five brothers – that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.”* This not sharing was a family affair; the whole family had grown accustomed to walking by Lazarus on their way to sumptuous feasts. It is easier to ignore our nameless neighbors when everyone else in our group is doing the same.

*But Abraham replied, “They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.” He said, “No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.” 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.”*

That we should care for the poor is no secret. God’s law given through Moses, and all the prophets sent by God make this clear. This is not some new teaching with Jesus. But we are hardhearted people. Even we Christians who have believed in Jesus’ resurrection from the dead often do not share with the poor. Sometimes we even build walls to hide the sight of them or enact laws to keep them in their own places and their own lands. But God is not mocked. “Whatever a man sows that will he also reap” the scriptures tell us. Jesus’ story indicates the reaping may not come until the life to come.

Sometimes we Lutherans use the promise of forgiveness as a kind of eraser to make this story Jesus tells go away. “I am not saved by works,” I say as an excuse to keep on closing my heart to my neighbor in need. That you are saved by grace you should never doubt. That God has a deep love for everyone – especially for those who are suffering – you should never doubt that either. The only Son of God joined them in their suffering, their dying. And Jesus tells us that if we want to encounter him in this world today we can do so at this altar and in our encounter with those who are hungry and naked and sick and in prison.

God hopes that you and I will help others to realize how possible it is to share, and to learn the names of those who were just the poor, or the mentally ill, or the elderly in nursing homes. For if we know their names they will be sisters and brothers – family for us.