

Our scripture story today is one that will likely make you feel uncomfortable – at least it should. When we read the parable, we can't help but dislike the rich man – on so many levels. But let's read the story anyway. Because here too there is grace for us, the rich.

Luke 16:19-31

There was a certain rich man who clothed himself in purple and fine linen, and who feasted luxuriously every day.

At his gate lay a certain poor man named Lazarus who was covered with sores. Lazarus longed to eat the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table. Instead, dogs would come and lick his sores.

The poor man died and was carried by angels to Abraham's side.

The rich man also died and was buried.

While being tormented in the place of the dead, he looked up and saw Abraham at a distance with Lazarus at his side.

He shouted, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me.

Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I'm suffering in this flame."

But Abraham said, "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received good things, whereas Lazarus received terrible things.

Now Lazarus is being comforted, and you are in great pain. Moreover, a great crevasse has been fixed between us and you. Those who wish to cross over from here to you cannot. Neither can anyone cross from there to us."

The rich man said, "Then I beg you, Father, send Lazarus to my father's house. I have five brothers. He needs to warn them so that they don't come to this place of agony."

Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the Prophets. They must listen to them."

The rich man said, "No, Father Abraham! But if someone from the dead goes to them, they will change their hearts and lives."

Abraham said, "If they don't listen to Moses and the Prophets, then neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead."

This is a parable of stark contrasts: wealth and poverty, health and disease, comfort and suffering, compassion and indifference.

At first glance, this parable seems to be about riches and judgment. Heaven and hell, but as we look more closely, we see that it is really about mercy—the mercy we offer or withhold—and how that mercy shapes our souls. Here Jesus challenges us to see with the eyes of mercy and to respond with the hands of compassion. We are invited to confront a sobering question within us: Do we truly see the suffering around us, or do we look past it or through it so that we can only see what we want to see.

Jesus begins the parable by introducing the two men. The first he describes only as "a rich man." He is clothed in purple and fine linen — a symbol of status and privilege. Every day, he feasts lavishly, living a life of ease and self-indulgence.

Then there is Lazarus. Unlike the rich man, Lazarus is given a name—an act of dignity. His name means "God has helped," and yet in life, he receives no help from the people around him. He lies outside the rich man's gate.

He is the very opposite of the rich man. Instead of purple cloth – he is covered with purple boils. Instead of luxurious feasts, he is longing for scraps from the table. Instead of servants to care for him, dogs lick his wounds.

But here is the painful detail that makes this parable so disturbing: Lazarus is not hidden. He is not out of sight. He is lying there at the rich man's gate—visible, near, and impossible to miss. And yet, the rich man passes by him day after day.

The tragedy is not that the rich man hates Lazarus—it is that he ignores him. He is indifferent to Lazarus and blind to the person that Lazarus is. Sure, he sees Lazarus with his physical eyes but never with the eyes of his heart.

And isn't this how our blindness works too? We don't hate the people who are suffering around us, but we look past them. We sit in our warm – or cool houses and eat our delicious food. We become so accustomed to our creature comforts and to convenience that those around us who are suffering become only part of the scenery—a passing blur in the background of our busy lives.

As Anabaptists, we are called to resist this blindness. We value simplicity and community in worship and in lifestyle. Yet we are not immune to the comfort that numbs and the busyness that distracts. Jesus is calling us to slow down, to open our eyes, and to see the Lazaruses at our own gates.

Before we go any further, there is an image in this parable that is easy to overlook. As Lazarus lies at the gate, dogs come and lick his wounds.

In the ancient world, dogs were considered unclean, scavenging animals. And yet, in this parable, the dogs show more mercy than the rich man. While the rich man daily steps over Lazarus lying at his gate, the dogs approach him. They draw near and offer what little comfort they can. This is a humbling image: even the beasts of the earth offer more kindness than the man of privilege.

The dogs reflect a surprising glimpse of God's mercy – reflecting the tenderness that humans are meant to show.

The scene shifts. Both men die. Lazarus is carried by angels to the bosom of Abraham—a place of comfort and peace. The rich man, however, finds himself in Hades, tormented by flames. The chasm that separated them in life now also exists in death – but here their situations are reversed.

We can be tempted to go on a long spiel now to talk about heaven and hell and what is Jesus saying about heaven and hades – and what not. But a definition of heaven and hell is absolutely not the point of this story.

It is good, however, to remember that Jesus was a faithful Jew and most of the people he spoke to were Jewish. The Jewish people – at the time of Jesus – only had a rudimentary idea of heaven or hell. Heaven was where God – and the prophets and the ancestors were. And Hades was a Greek concept of torment and fire – but we could say that it was a place where God was not.

In life, the rich man had it all, in death, he had nothing but torment. But what is most sad here is that even in death, the rich man's heart is unchanged. Notice his words. He does not address Lazarus directly. Instead, he asks Abraham to send Lazarus to cool his tongue. "Send Lazarus – as your servant

– or mine – to do what I want him to do.” Lazarus is still considered inferior. Instead of a child of God, receiving his deserved rest, the rich man is bartering with Lazarus as the servant tasked to do his will.

Even here, the rich man really doesn't see Lazarus.

And here we see one of the real warnings of this parable – a moral, to be sure. Being indifferent to the needs around you shapes your soul. The rich man's sin was not his wealth but his failure to love. His lack of mercy calcified his soul, and he carried that blindness even past death.

Jesus' warning in this parable, is not about vengeance – it's not “the rich will get what they deserve” – no. Jesus' warning is about the natural consequence of a heart closed to mercy. The chasm separating heaven from Hades in this parable is simply a reflection of the chasm the rich man created in life.

After pleading for relief, the rich man makes a final request: that Lazarus be sent to warn his brothers. But Abraham refuses, saying:

“They have Moses and the prophets; let them listen to them.” (Luke 16:29)

The point is clear. What does the scripture say about how we treat others? What does Scripture say about what God desires most? Throughout the Hebrew Bible, - the writings of Moses (the 1st 5 books) and the prophets (Isaiah to Malachi) all speak to God's desire for God's people to live in community with honour. To worship God alone, to show kindness and mercy to the immigrant, the widow and the orphans – the ones who have nothing and no one to look out for them.

Jesus too acts with mercy, honour, and respect in the ways that he treats the poor, the sick, the unclean, the forgotten, the children, the women, and all who, in his day, had no power.

In response to the rich man asking for Lazarus to return to his brothers – as they would change their ways if they got a warning from a dead man – Abraham reminds him that the brothers already know the importance of mercy and kindness and justice. If they don't understand it from studying the scripture – they won't understand it from the voice of a dead man.

And us too. We have Scripture. We are taught in Sunday School, in study and sermon, in interaction and hopefully in our families the way of Christ. But many of us in the world don't believe God is calling us to love our neighbour as we love ourselves – even though someone DID return from the dead and reminded us to do this.

Pause

And so, the question comes through the millennia down to us today. Jesus asks, “**who is at our gate?**”

- The neighbor struggling with loneliness.
- The transgender adult who has been disowned by her family
- The immigrant family longing for safety and welcome.
- The youth who is discerning their gender – and is praying that this is a safe place to know that they too are included in God's family
- The person battling depression, hidden behind a polite smile.
- The new people at church who just want to belong.

The list could go on. We know the people we have overlooked – either on purpose or because of indifference. We know the suffering at our gate.

We do not need to look far to find Lazarus. The parable calls us to **notice**—to see with the eyes of mercy and to draw near with the hands of compassion.

So what does this mercy look like in practice?

Mercy begins with seeing.

We must learn to look beyond what we want to see. To see with the eyes of Christ is to notice the humanity in others.

Mercy requires nearness.

Jesus did not love from afar—He came near. As Anabaptists, we believe our God is calling us to practice incarnational faith. This is a faith that is lived. It steps into the messiness of life. Mercy is not abstract charity—it is relational presence.

Mercy is sacrificial.

True mercy costs us something. It costs us comfort, time, and sometimes even reputation.

The rich man's wealth made him blind. Christ calls us to see with God's eyes.

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus is an invitation. It invites us to live in the light of Christ. Christ who touched the leper, who woke the dead, who blessed the children and did not turn away from the terror of his own suffering.

And so, friends, let us see with kindness, humility, patience and mercy everyone who is around us - even when it makes us feel uncomfortable. It is good for us to examine what we have and what we love and how it does/does not contribute to the suffering of others.

May we be people of mercy—people who cross chasms rather than create them.

And may our lives offer the world a glimpse of God's coming kingdom—a kingdom where the lowly are lifted, the broken are healed, and the last are made first and all are welcome to come sit at the table.