

The Second Mark of Discipleship: Disciples Serve and Do Justice

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Luke 16: 9, 19 to 31

9And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.

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." '

The last time we were together, we talked about what I called the first mark of being a disciple or a follower of Christ. To be a disciple means extending a bold welcome and hospitality to others. This morning we will talk about the second mark of Christian discipleship, which has to do with serving and doing justice.

It is just not enough to say that we love Jesus or that we have brought him into our hearts until we can show that love by serving others. It was William Sloan Coffin who once said, "that the smallest package in the world is someone who is all wrapped up in himself." I think, however, when we think about Christian service we get in a bind. So often we think that some kinds of service are a whole lot more important than others. We look with envy on so-called superstar Christians who demonstrate an extraordinary capacity to serve. But in so doing, we tend to diminish the gifts that we have to offer. Martin Luther King Jr., used to chide his congregation

when he said that some churches boast that they have so many doctors, and lawyers, and business, and teachers were in their church. He said it was great that all these people go to church. But he said in these churches some folks talk like other people don't count. For King, this was not the Christian way. For you see all of us have a profound and amazing ability to give of self. To serve well does not require a degree or some special preparation. Instead, you just have to begin with a loving heart to serve well.

A few years ago, a man in our church passed from this life to the next. His name was Quentin Ivy. During much of his life, Quentin was a United Methodist pastor. But when Quentin retired, he proudly assumed the position of church greeter. He would stand at the entrance door or in this sanctuary every Sunday where he would just greet people. He was not partial in his greeting whatsoever. He knew everyone's name and he just tried to love them. He greeted people as if he was greeting Christ himself. There came a time when Quentin became more affected by Alzheimer's which meant he forgot people's names. Quentin still stood there, in his Sunday best, and smiled and looked and smiled at you like he really knew you.

When Quentin passed away, his accomplishments as a pastor were duly noted at his memorial service. But what is perhaps so impressive were the stories of all the people who remembered the kindness that Quentin offered to them as a greeter all those years. One couple from here spoke of how they had moved away and tried to find another church, but they just could not seem to find one. Eventually, they confided in Quentin's wife Ivy that what they really missed in other churches was the quality of Quentin's hospitality and welcome.

In the Gospel, we hear a story about another man, a rich man dressed in his purple finery. This man had a very different sort of disposition of heart than Quentin. The rich man did not stand at the door in his nice suit to welcome people. Instead, he treated poor people with contempt. As matter of fact, Lazarus was forced to eat the crumbs and left overs that dropped from the man's table. The rich man committed one of the greater sins in this life which was to hoard money and not share it with others. The rich man was the sort of person who thought it was really ok to cut people's food stamps while taking large financial subsidies for his own farming operation.

But the story goes that Lazarus died and went to heaven and the rich man died and was tormented in fires of Hades. The rich man in desperation, called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and asked Abraham if he could send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool his tongue; Oh he said, I am in agony in these flames.' When the rich man realized he would get no mercy, he made another request. He asked Abraham if he could tell Lazarus to go back to earth to warn his brothers not to succumb to greed so that his brothers would not end up in the fires of hell as well. But Abraham told the rich man that there was little hope these brothers would listen to Lazarus. Why? Because the rich man's brothers already had the prophets and Moses to instruct them. Why would they listen to Lazarus if they would not listen to Moses and the Prophets?

The story of the rich man and Lazarus is a harsh story that always makes me bristle. I always squirm and can barely stand to preach on it sometimes. It just seems so over the top and absent of forgiveness. And for those of us who don't really believe in hell, the fate of the rich man seems in some way inconsistent with God's grace and the resurrection which shows that God's love has no bounds.

But Jesus told this story to get our attention. He did not want his ancient world audience to rationalize greediness and callousness towards the poor. In the face of the maniacal consumerism and political and economic oppression of Rome which gripped the ancient world, Jesus had another agenda. Jesus made it plain that contrary to what the world might say about the poor and the outcast that their poverty and oppression were in no way blessed by God.

To follow Jesus, it was about more than charity where we toss a few crumbs to the poor off our table. No, following Jesus was about taking on an empire of people dressed in purple robes who wanted to preserve their privilege and squash the poor. Jesus wanted his followers to feel the force of this story and listen to Moses and the Prophets in the way the rich man and his brothers were not inclined to do. God does judge the insensitivity, callousness and harshness of this world.

Being a disciple is about doing justice, which means advocating very strongly for the poor and having the courage to stand up to greed and the abuse of power. It is the Jesus way. It has always been so. This summer, I went to see the remains of Caesera Phillipi which was Herod's beach resort and government headquarters on the Mediterranean Sea. In that compound, I looked at what remained of the Hippodrome, which was an enormous stadium. This was where followers of Christ, who stood up to the abuse of Herod, often found themselves fed to the lions. Herod in his royal finest, stood on an observation platform where he could have a clear view of the Mediterranean sea without looking at the commoners cheering in the stands. Herod could look at beauty of the sea if things got a little bloody as the lions munched on Christians and Jews who dared to stand up to Herod.

More recently, in the Nineteenth Century pastor's in New England Mill towns had to subject themselves to the indignity of having their sermons reviewed by the mill owner on Saturday nights. The mill owner wanted to be sure that the preacher would not incite a riot by advocating for the rights of workers in these factory towns. The mill owner wanted the pastor to preach a form of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called cheap grace. Cheap grace is easy Forgiveness or love, which refuses to take oppression and evil seriously. I am grateful that I don't have Mill owners reviewing my sermons on Saturday nights. However, the mill owner's absence does not mean that I am absolved of the pressure which the minister must have felt as he wrote under the mill owner's gaze when I get up here to speak. The pressure to not question power, oppression, and the like still persists. Being a preacher and Christian, I know if I let the story of the rich man and Lazarus really grip my imagination, I am playing with fire.

As Christians, we have always worried about what will happen if we do or speak prophetically. But when Jesus grips our hearts, we also need to worry about what will happen if we let fear get the best of us and say and do nothing. Do we hold the rich man and his influence more in our mind's eye than we hold in our minds the face of the poor?

I remember my mother told me that when she was a young, how profoundly upset she was, along with millions of other Americans, on the day Martin Luther King, Jr, was shot. My mother, went to church, hoping to hear some words of comfort from the preacher. Some prophetic word about this injustice. But the preacher made a very political decision chose to say nothing, not a word. We don't know why he chose not to speak; maybe he was always worried about the blow back he would get if he advocated too strongly for justice. Maybe he worried about how he would get

a nasty note from someone who thought he was introducing politics in worship. So that preacher made another very political decision and decided to say nothing. Ironically, that preacher still got in hot water anyway from people in his parish. Or at least he was in hot water with my mother.

That morning after King was shot, people wanted to have, at least, an acknowledgement that King's death was emblematic of the intense resistance this society had to King's searing but non-violent criticism of racism, poverty, and the military-industrial complex. As a preacher, I always remember my mother's agony when I prepare to speak. We still are dealing with incredible poverty and injustice in our world and this community. And everyday, there are people like King who lose their lives everyday because of war and our refusal regulate the use of weapons. There are Lazarus's all around.

So at the end of the day I realize as Christians we just have to pray on stuff, and say and do what we think is right and just let the chips fall where they may. But whenever we get scared and worried, we must remember that our guidelines don't come from Herod's or the rich man's playbook. Instead, we get our guidelines from Moses and the prophets. We get our guidelines from Jesus who was an itinerant preacher, who said, "foxes, have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head." We get our guidelines from the suffering Christ who told us to pick up a cross and follow him. So my friends, a mark of a disciple of Jesus means serving and doing justice. Anyone can serve. All you need is to cultivate a loving heart and to just start loving people. This is not work left for professionals. All of us have a calling no matter how young or old. And all of us are called to find the courage to do justice. It is not enough to just feed the hungry Lazaruses of this world. We also have to ask why it is that Lazarus is poor and hungry in the first place and have the courage to speak up and do something about it.

In closing, I leave you with these words from Rachel Maddow in her address to the graduates of Smith College:

Some dreams are bad dreams. . . . Hopefully life is long. Do stuff you will enjoy thinking about and telling stories about for many years to come. Do stuff you will want to brag about.

And this:

Going just for personal triumph for yourself but for durable achievement to be proud of for life is the difference between winning things and leadership. It is the difference between nationalism and patriotism. It is the difference between running for office and devoting yourself to public service. It's agreeing that you are part of something, taking as your baseline that you will not seek to reach your own goals by stepping on the neck of your community.

So be disciples. Serve well and do justice at all times to benefit our community and world. Amen.