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Sermon
September 29, 2013
Park Congregational Church
Worcester, Massachusetts

“Taking the Present World Seriously”

Scripture Text: Luke 16:19-31

Dear people of God, Christians frequently view life as a cosmic game. The winners of the game are those who make it into heaven. The losers are those who don't. In other words, it's believed that the aim of life in this world really has nothing to do with this world. It has to do with another world, a world beyond, which supposedly is our real home. This present life then is little more than a testing ground, a warmup to the real show which takes place in some nebulous afterlife.

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus speaks directly to this issue. It's one of Jesus's most intriguing parables because its focus is really not on the judgment following death--as is often assumed--but rather, on our attitude toward others in this life. The rich man walked past Lazarus every day, but he had no compassion for him. Lazarus's needs were obvious, but the rich man felt no sense of obligation in meeting them. The problem for the rich man was not his lack of faith in God; it was his lack of regard for Lazarus.

The parable's focus is on this present life, not on the afterlife. Christian teaching, especially of the evangelical variety, has often led us to believe that life in the next world is what really matters. Everything that goes on here in present life is only secondary or preliminary. It's very interesting, though, to study what the Bible really says on this matter. In many cases, the Bible talks of heaven not as a place alongside of this present life, but rather, as this present creation renewed in the future, this present creation cleansed of all sin and evil. In other words, heaven is connected to this present world temporally, not spatially. That is, heaven is not another world alongside of this one, but rather, this present world in the future. And so heaven is not otherworldly, but rather, is very much weaved from the fabric of this world, because heaven will in fact one day be this world, what the Bible calls the new heavens and the new earth. The word, new, in this context doesn't mean "brand new in the sense of never having been before," but rather, new in the sense of "restored to newness."

But the popular understanding of the Christian faith is that our actions here in this life are of importance only insofar as they determine our eternal destiny. We do good in order to get into heaven. As a result, Christian spirituality has often attempted to avoid this world, to flee all

areas of culture, to ignore any learning that seems to conflict with the Bible, such as evolution, homosexuality, and finding ways to prevent social injustice. Many Christians give to charity as a means of securing their own salvation, trying to demonstrate to God what good people they are, how deserving they are to go to heaven. This has prompted many critics to claim that Christians are just as selfish as anyone else. We do good for ulterior reasons. We do good only because we want to go to heaven. This kind of attitude sees present life as only a means to a greater end.

It seems to me, however, that the point of this parable in Luke 16 is instruction not in how to enter into the next life, but rather, in how to live well in this one. Jesus wants us to live in this world wisely, responsibly, and charitably. The issues that Jesus sets before us are larger than putting stars in our individual crowns. Human suffering is not a matter of indifference to God. Indeed, it's a matter of eternal significance. God's concern for the well-being of others here on earth follows us to the grave . . . and beyond. But God doesn't allow people to suffer in order to find out who will respond to their needs, and thereby earn enough points to make it into heaven. In this parable, God isn't concerned with our personal sins, but rather, with the needs of those

around us. The rich man finds himself in torment because he neglected the obvious needs of Lazarus, whom he ignored every day of his earthly life.

The same question put to us by the Bible in different ways is, “What is the focus of your life here and now?” Do we live for ourselves: our comfort, our security, our salvation? Or do we live for others? Micah, the Old Testament prophet, prompts us with the correct answer: “God has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). That demand didn’t change with the New Testament. We don’t fulfill this demand as an attempt to earn our salvation. We are to fulfill this commandment out of gratitude for the salvation that God has already obtained for us, accepting us as covenant people bound in faith.

Protestants seem to be little different than Catholics or Orthodox Christians in this regard. Like them we tend to be preoccupied with the afterlife, constantly wondering whether we have done enough good works to make it into heaven. But if we live a life of gratitude to God, if we seek to live with integrity, if we seek to do good and avoid evil, and believe in faith that God has accepted us in Christ, then we don’t need to

worry about the afterlife.

The mistake that the rich man in the parable made is that he wasn't grateful for the good things that he enjoyed in life. He took them for granted every time that he passed by poor Lazarus without helping him. And it's noteworthy that even when he finds himself in torment after he dies, he still doesn't seem to understand why he's there. He just doesn't get it, as evidenced by his plea to have Abraham send Lazarus to his five brothers to warn them not to come to his place of torment. The rich man is still preoccupied with the afterlife. His main concern is that his brothers should not go where he is. He's not concerned that his brothers live a righteous life on earth out of gratitude to God and love toward their neighbors. No, his main concern is that they do whatever is necessary to avoid going to a place of torment. The rich man's motivation is still a self-centered one. He doesn't want his brothers to live a rewarding, happy life for its own sake, but rather, only to avoid being tormented afterward. Good deeds are still a means to an end for him. He still thinks that he and his brothers need to earn their salvation. The rich man just doesn't get it.

We're called upon to feed the hungry, visit the sick, and clothe the naked not to coerce God into accepting us into heaven. We should do it,

rather, thankfully, knowing that God has already accepted us as we are. You see, we can refuse God's acceptance of us. That may sound odd, but it's nevertheless true. We refuse God's acceptance of us every time that we think we must prove ourselves by some good work to merit our way into heaven, every time that we think that we must enter a relationship with God on our terms, not on God's. That was the rich man's mistake. He never accepted the fact that God had already accepted him out of sheer grace, and so, he lost out on the very thing that he was striving to attain. "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for Christ's sake will find it" (Mt. 10:39).

We should do good toward our neighbors because God is concerned about their welfare. Our neighbors are not test cases for us to see whether we deserve to go to heaven. The same is true with how we treat our planet. God is concerned about its welfare. Its creation was an act of God. But its destruction could well be our doing: polluting the land and water with our waste, cutting down rain forests, killing off species of animals and plants, spewing greenhouse gases into the atmosphere that result in global warming. We human beings are not totally separated creatures from the rest of this planet. There is not one physical element of which humans are composed which is not also found in the world at

large somewhere. Human beings are interconnected with a vast intricate and delicate ecosystem.

One question that this parable raises for us is “What are we going to do with our world?” How are we going to shape its history? What will be the destiny of this world as God leaves it in human hands? The great theologian and martyr for the Christian faith, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, argues that for Christians, the only ethical question is, “How shall the next generation live?” Do we feel responsible for the generations that will follow us in terms of what kind of world we leave behind for them? Or is our focus so exclusively on heaven, conceived of in otherworldly terms, that we don’t care what happens to earth once we’re dead?

There are many Christians who don’t bother with any kind of environmental efforts to preserve our world, because they say, “God is going to destroy the world anyway.” Oh really? What are these persons going to do if after they die and are resurrected, they find out that they’re right back here on planet earth, which by then will be the new heavens and the new earth? We are stewards of our time and place in history whether we think of it in global or local terms. We are responsible for the condition of this world when we pass it on to others.

The purpose of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus is to direct

our attention to taking this present world seriously rather than to disregard it in favor of the next. The parable warns us about allowing ourselves to be distracted by self-indulgent pleasures. It alerts us not to allow ourselves to overlook the poor and the miserable among us who desperately need our help. The parable cautions us about not wasting our time pursuing minor diversions. We don't know when our time will be up. But we know that we do not have all the time in the world. Our clocks are ticking away, and with each tick we get closer to the end. Any sudden turn of events in our lives reminds us that we are not immortal. We may be called at any time to give up our lives and go to be with God. I don't say, "and go to be home," because I don't want us to get stuck in the habit of thinking that this present world is somehow not our home.

Some of you get the MeTV network. It shows nothing but old television programs from the 50s, 60s, and 70s. On Sunday nights, it showcases Sunday Night Noir, those programs about crime that use dark shadows and lighting to show the complicated moral nature of the show's subject. One of the programs shown on Sunday Night Noir is *The Naked City*. Some of you older folks might remember this show. It always ends by saying, "There are eight million stories in the Naked City. This has been one of them." It's too bad we don't have thoughtful TV shows like

The Naked City today instead of the junk that passes for entertainment most nights. One episode of *The Naked City* starring Academy Award-winning actress Maureen Stapleton had her playing a woman who attempted to commit suicide because she had a terminal disease. The detectives manage to save her when she attempts to jump from a building and later find out that she wasn't jumping because she wanted to die, but rather, because she had never really lived. Her sadness came from missed opportunities because she had never taken her present life seriously.

When we stand before our Creator at the end of time to give an accounting of our days, I don't think that God's concern is going to be with our sins and shortcomings. Those are foregone conclusions. God has already accepted us in Christ despite all of the nasty things we may have done. God's concern will be, I think, whether we have truly been thankful for the life that has been graciously given to us to experience. Did we truly appreciate those occasions when we felt loved and gave love to others, when we felt cared for and cared for others, when we lived justly and treated others with justice and importance? Was the world a nicer place because of our presence within it?

Heaven is the projection forward--into God's time and space--of a

life lived right now with gratitude, integrity, and love. Amen.