

Lessons for Living a Life: Don't Wait

*A sermon preached on Luke 16:19-31 by Emily Hull McGee
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC on September 29, 2019*

I.

I've told you before the story of a group of high school students from the local school for the blind who went on a field trip. They were enjoying all the day's fun, when in a group, these students were asked by their host about how their experiences in life differed from those in the "seeing world." Quickly their teacher corrected the host. "The seeing world? No no no – we call it the 'sighted world.' Just because you have sight doesn't mean that you can see."¹

It's no wonder that Jesus uses images of sight and sound to describe how people respond to his message. "Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear?" Jesus says to his disciples in Mark. "Let anyone with ears listen!" Jesus says to the crowds in Matthew. And today to the Pharisees who have been ridiculing Jesus's take on money, Jesus tells them a story of seeing and hearing, a story of warning and doing, a story that demands of you and you and you and me: *don't wait*.

II.

This is one of those parables that, like last week's parable of the unjust manager, sometimes feels a little more unsettling than we'd like to feel on any given day. The images of Lazarus with his sores and the dog and the rich man in agony are just too sharp. The takeaway of a world in which one's wealth determines one's fate is just too stinging. The invitation to consider the

^{1 2} Story told at the Duke Divinity School Convocation of Christian Leaders by Pastor Mike Mather of Broadway United Methodist Church in Indianapolis, IN, on September 29, 2016.

eternal chasm that divides Lazarus and the rich man is just too close for comfort. The reminders of Abraham and Moses and all the prophets and Jesus who call us to a more excellent way are just too confining. Pair today's parable on money with last week's on money, and for many of us, Luke 16 becomes a nice skip-over between the radical grace of father who welcomes home a lost son in Luke 15 and the faith like a mustard seed that can move trees in Luke 17.

But when we actually allow the rich man and Lazarus to confront us in ways that matter, too often we try to both find ourselves in it and ease our way out of it.

Perhaps we hear this parable and equate our lives with Lazarus's. *I'm not like the rich man, we say, because my financial portfolio is nothing compared to theirs! I'm more like Lazarus, overlooked in this life but will get my due in the next...* forgetting blindly that in comparison to all the people in the world, the vast majority of us in here are among the wealthiest, given that the global median income hovers around \$9700 a year.²

Or some might feel a hint of doomsday and say, *I'm just like the rich man, and there's no hope for me – I'm hopeless! – so why not just enjoy the luxuries I can.*

Still others of us might perceive the heat of this parable with our lives and feel more compassion towards the rich man. *He didn't actively do anything wrong, we tell ourselves. It's not like he was physically harming Lazarus! He may have brought Lazarus a meal some time, or he probably has*

² <https://news.gallup.com/poll/166211/worldwide-median-household-income-000.aspx> . I found this by way of Giving What We Can that has on their homepage a wealth calculator, asking for the user to input his or her income and household size, which is then compared to households around the world.

said hello other times. Give the guy a break – is he a bad guy doomed to eternal thirst and agony just because he’s rich? He didn’t even do anything!

III.

That “give the guy a break, he didn’t even do anything” line of thinking recalls for me the Book of Common Prayer, which offers this searing confession to guide Christian worship and prayer each day. It says this:

*Most merciful God,
we confess that we have sinned against you
in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done,
and by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you with our whole heart;
we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.
We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.³*

I deeply love this prayer, even as it often pains me to pray it. For in an economy of words, it says it best – God, we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed; by what we have done and by what we have left undone.” That last phrase for me is the one where the words seem to catch in my throat. For it’s one thing to confess to God where I’ve failed – the sins of **commission**, our Catholic friends point out – the breaking-the-Ten-Commandments, obvious kinds of sins. But it’s quite another to confess where I’ve failed without realizing it or doing anything about it – the sins of **omission**, where I could have acted but didn’t, when I had the resources and the opportunity to live out the love Jesus asks of me but chose not too. Those are the failures that keep me up at night, the times in my defensiveness

³ Book of Common Prayer

before God that make me want to cry out, ‘but I didn’t even do anything!’ and then realize that this is precisely the problem.

You know them too, don’t you, these sins of omission? Your kid asks you for something but you’ve got other “more important” things to attend to. Your boss directed you to write that report weeks ago, but hey – he hasn’t asked about it, so I’m not bringing it up! You watch the news, you hear about tragedies of people all over the world – refugees seeking safety or hurricane victims seeking relief, teens seeking action on climate change or domestic violence victims seeking justice – and you say to yourself, ‘this isn’t right, and I’m going to do something about it!’ But then you think: *you know, I really was saving that little bit of money for vacation this year, and I really need a vacation! Plus I don’t know how to find the phone number for my congressional representatives to call and share my opinions, and I’m sure plenty other people will call too.* You remember that you’ve been meaning to call that friend who’s still grieving the death of her dad and go over for a visit, but then find yourself rationalizing it: *I mean, it’s almost been a year now, and I’m sure other people are attending to her, and I bet she’s fine.* You pass by the man in the ditch, your eyes travel past the man at the gate, you think ‘what’s one lost sheep when I have 99 others?’

Father James Keenan calls these sins of omission the “failure to bother to love.” “Our sin is usually not in what we did, not in what we could not avoid, not in what we tried not to do,” Father Keenan continues. “Our sin is usually where you and I are comfortable, where we do not feel the need to bother – where...we have found complacency, a complacency not where we rest in being loved, but where we rest in our delusional self-understanding of

how much better we are than others. It is at that point of self-satisfaction that—like...the Pharisee, the prodigal's older brother, or the rich man—we usually do not bother to love.”⁴

But we know the times that others have bothered to love us, and what a difference that has made. We know the times when we've been seen and heard, when we've been unexpectedly cared for, when others have gone out of their way to know us and love us anyways. And most importantly, we know the times when God has bothered to love us, when we've been held by that love that will not let us go.

With that, I wonder if instead of inserting our own lives into that of the rich man or Lazarus, we considered what it might be like to watch this parable unfold from the outside, as one of the rich man's brothers he'd like to warn before it's too late. Who or what is God inviting us to see? Who is God nudging us to bother to love? What might it be like for us to consider the lasting impact of our own sins of omission in the everyday? Where are the gates in our lives where others sit out of our view or consideration? What resources do we have that inadvertently keep us from really seeing God's beloved children all around us? So that we can lean into the robust love of God and neighbor to which we are commanded, what must we first lay down — our phone, our ambition, our calendar, our feelings of self-importance, our fear, our worry that we won't do something right? What must we do so that gates in this life don't grow into chasms in the next? How is God inviting me to love more boldly and show compassion more boundlessly?

⁴ James Keenan, *Moral Wisdom: Lessons and Texts from the Catholic Tradition*.

IV.

In the height of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, a group of white ministers wrote up a public statement for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., urging him in the name of their shared Christian faith, to slow down, to be more patient in his quest for justice, to loosen the relentless press for civil rights. Theirs wasn't the only such letter Dr. King would receive in those days. "It is possible you're in too great a religious hurry," one white ally from Texas sent his way. "The teachings of Christ take time to come to earth!"

Dr. King responded to these critics in what became known as his famous *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. He noted the number of similar requests he'd received. He acknowledged the rationale behind them. He conceded that complete justice must await the coming of God.

But in words that have echoed throughout the generations since, he claimed holy ground to remind us that time itself cannot cure all ills; rather, time can be used for good or evil. For Dr. King, human progress is not inevitable but rather "it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right."⁵

V.

Dr. King knew it. Jesus knew it. Prophets and priests, saints and sinners throughout the years have known it too.

For once you see, you can't unsee. Once you see the proverbial man at the gate and the actual man at the gate, you know he's there. His story, his

⁵ Story told by Thomas G. Long in "They Also Serve Who Wait," from *Something is About to Happen...*, p49.

presence, his needs, his humanity, his belovedness chases you around in dogged pursuit. You can't shake it, you can't not see it, you can't let it go, you can't let him go.

And once you see injustice, once you see suffering, once you see the places and people and pockets of this world that need you to bother to love them, the task becomes urgent. The problem cannot wait. It cannot hold. It cannot be patient. It cannot delay. For it is a matter of eternal significance. It's not something you can overlook, or shift until next week, or to somebody else, or just let it lie. The time, you see, is always ripe to do right.

Jesus ends the parable with the reminder that we have Moses, we have the prophets, we have the one who died and rose again so that the world might know that death never has the final word. *Is that enough for us to see? Is that enough for us to act?*

I sure hope so, so that when we pray to God, confessing the things we have done and the things we have left undone, we will hear back the reminder from the God of grace and glory, "I, the almighty God, have mercy on you, forgive you all of your sins through the Lord Jesus Christ, strengthen you in all goodness, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, keep you and never let you go."⁶

That is our promise. That is our invitation. How will you respond?

⁶ With gratitude to Laurie DeMott for her inspiring conclusion to a sermon on this text. I found it to be so effective! You can find it here: <https://unionuniversitychurch.org/2019/02/24/what-we-have-left-undone/>