



THE SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

SEPTEMBER 29, 2019

LUKE 16: 19-31

“WHO’S THE HONKY?”

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

“The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’

“But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’

“He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’

“Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’

“‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’

“He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

- As a Senior in high school, I needed to go to college in another part of the country. Eighteen midwest years were enough.
- So even though, I wasn’t smart enough, somehow, I was accepted at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, NC....
- But, I had no idea that North Carolina was another world, culturally.
- When I walked into my dorm room, I was met by Randy Banks, a stocky redhead from New Bern, North Carolina. Having arrived at our room first he, of course, already had

the bottom bunk. Pinned to the wall to the right of the light switch was a large beach towel.

- On it was pictured an old, overweight bearded Confederate soldier, Confederate flag waving behind him bearing the slogan, “Hell, no, we’ll never forget.”
- Having attended integrated schools and an integrated church, and with my best friends being Jewish, I just did not think in terms of conflict with another race, religion, or area of the country. And I sure didn’t think the outcome of the Civil War was an ongoing issue.
- But it wasn’t just Randy Banks from Small Town, NC. It seemed most kids from the south had different perspectives from mine.
- Many were still openly racist. White guys were still oriented toward a single hairstyle—short—and clothes—I had never heard of or seen an alpaca sweater—and music—what was beach music? And I had no exposure to that slow, Southern drawl, y’all.
- Randy Banks favorite name for me was Damn Yankee. Go figure.
- I’ve lived in Ohio, North Carolina, Washington DC, Los Angeles, South Carolina, Virginia, Illinois, and now, Pennsylvania. People are both similar and different, yinz jagoffs.
- I’ve worked with all kinds of people in therapy—Koreans and Hispanic Catholic priests. Criminals and Lutheran pastors. Gay men and lesbian couples.
- From my experience, we can divide the world into two groups of people. There are people, regardless of race, religion, gender preference, or political affiliation, who work toward reaching across the chasm and building community with others who are different from them. And there are those who see *‘the other’* as a threat to their lifestyle or as a danger to be eliminated.
- A few current examples of the latter, after two thousand years of Christianity and the admonition to “love your neighbor as yourself”:
- Right here in Pittsburgh, 2018 included the deadliest attack on Jews in the history of the United States. The Pittsburgh attack by a white supremacist was one of 39 reported physical attacks on Jews, a 105% increase over 2017.

- Across the country, mosques are vandalized, local governments denounce Islam, and state legislatures debate anti-Muslim laws. Anti-Muslim incidents include violence, opposition to Muslim resettlement, opposition to Muslim cemeteries, mosques, and schools, and opposition by elected and appointed officials.
- The department of homeland security has added white supremacy to its list of domestic threats, emphasizing white nationalist domestic terrorism as **a threat on par with foreign groups**. Such crimes grew by 24% in 2017, while recently we witnessed a white supremacist driving hours to kill twenty people at an El Paso Walmart, a city that is over 80% Hispanic and Latina. El Paso, a weekend shopping trip for people from Mexico.
- Yet people in Erie don't seem to have a problem with the weekend shoppers who drive over from Canada.
- Oh, but they're white, aren't they? No different from the dominant race in Erie.
- Why are so many white men insecure, lacking in self-esteem, emotionally empty, with violent urges and no relational skills?
- It gets a bit overwhelming. A recent study concludes that 1 out of every 16 women had an unwanted first sexual experience, meaning forced on them by the other.
- This disregard, hatred, and abuse crosses every possible relationship where there is an obvious difference between the two.
- When I lived in Los Angeles, I worked for H.B. Barnum, a black music producer and arranger. H.B. has worked with Aretha Franklin, Lou Rawls, Boz Scaggs, Luther Vandross, the Temptations, to name only a few, and was part of the famed LA wrecking crew of studio musicians in the 1960s.
- While working for H.B., his Big Band was contracted to play an event at the Hollywood Paladium: *Blacks for Nixon*. This was 1972, I think but, in retrospect, it still is hard to imagine that there were enough *Blacks for Nixon* to hold such an event.
- But H.B.'s Big Band was five saxes, four trumpets, three trombones, bass guitar, guitar, drummer, percussionist and piano. All were black musicians except yours truly on piano.

- We rehearsed at the Paladium one late afternoon and then were hanging out backstage, smoking and talking, until the festivities began.
- When, through the backstage door comes Redd Foxx, with a white woman on one arm and an Asian woman on the other.
- If you're young, you may not recall Redd Foxx but in 1972, he was at the height of his fame as star of the TV comedy, **Sanford and Son**. Prior to that, he had been a raunchy comedian, godfather of Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy.
- So, Redd Foxx walks in, stops suddenly, fixes me with a nasty look, and says loudly and angrily, "Who's the honky?"
- *Everyone freezes*, especially the only white boy backstage.
- And then one of the musicians slides over beside Redd and says quietly, "It's okay, Redd, he's with H.B."
- And **almost** everyone relaxes....
- You see, our parable this morning drives toward this dramatic moment when Father Abraham tells the rich man there is a great chasm between he and Lazarus.
- A chasm we know, as the hearer, existed the entire time for all time....
- The first scene is a brief but brilliant picture of a self-indulgent rich man who cares for no one but himself.
- Purple cloth was extremely expensive and he dressed in it every day. There's a play on words in the Greek text that humorously points out even his underwear was top-of-the-line.
- In addition, he feasts sumptuously every day, which means he does not observe the sabbath, nor does he let his servants have a day of rest. He publicly flaunts his violation of the Ten Commandments every week.

- Lying by his estate gate is a sick, hungry, neglected beggar. Isn't it curious that this poor beggar is the **only individual** with a name in all of Jesus' parables? We have the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, the Widow, the Merchant in search of the pearl, the Sower of seed, but only here do we have Lazarus, whose name means "the one whom God helps."
- **How nuts is this? He appears to be exactly the man that God does not help.**
- Members of the community respect him, though, and care for him the best they can. But the only man in town with the resources to take care of Lazarus is the rich man, so they carry him to the rich man's gate every day hoping he or his guests will have compassion.
- Such action is common in the Middle East where beggars gather outside church doors on Sundays and outside the doors of mosques for noon prayers on Friday.
- So, every day, only a few feet from Lazarus, a group of overfed wealthy men recline each day, while he lays in hunger and pain, listening to their conversation. Help is always near at hand, yet, every day, withheld from him.
- The dogs provide an interesting detail.
- In the day, dogs were not pets. Like pigs, they were considered unclean and wild animals. But the wealthy man even feeds the wild dogs, but not Lazarus.
- The Greek makes it clear that the dogs were not joining the rich man in tormenting Lazarus. An odd, detail, really.
- Why?
- Dogs lick their own wounds. And somehow the ancients knew that the saliva of dogs facilitates healing.
- The rich man will do nothing for Lazarus, but even these wild guard dogs, who attack all strangers, know Lazarus is their friend and do what they can—lick his sores.
- Jesus paints a picture of a kind gentleman who lives in quiet harmony with the animal world around him, despite his suffering....

- So, Lazarus dies and is too poor for a funeral. Nevertheless, he is transported to heaven by the angels and Father Abraham throws a party to welcome him.
- Shortly after, the rich man dies. He has a funeral and is buried. He finds himself in Hades enduring its torments.
- The chasm between them in their earthly lives is revealed in their life after.
- It's quite a surprise when the rich man recognizes Lazarus and knows his name. The rich man knew Lazarus was at his gate the entire time and was well-aware of his desperate plight.
- Even so, the rich man will not lower himself to apologize to Lazarus and beg his forgiveness. He does not even address Lazarus, but instead speaks to Abraham, "Father, have mercy on me!"
- The rich's man first demand is unbelievable. He wants Father Abraham to send Lazarus to him with a glass of water. When Lazarus was in pain day after day, he was ignored by the rich man who knew he was Lazarus. Now that the rich man is in pain, something must be done immediately! Instead of an apology, he demands services and from the very man he refused to help despite his great wealth. He wouldn't even give Lazarus some of his "dog food."
- Despite Father Abraham's repudiation, the rich man continues to ignore Lazarus and has the audacity to tell Father Abraham to use Lazarus as a messenger boy to warn his five rich brothers about their self-indulgent and uncaring lifestyle.
- The rich man's family is comprised of six brothers with six being a biblical number for evil. If they had included Lazarus as their brother in need, there would have been seven of them. Seven being the number of perfection.
- Once again, Jesus defines his followers as those who are able to include the ones we want to exclude.
- Christians are ones who reach across the chasm of human differences and build the bridges of connection and relationship.

- I know of no harder work because we innately fear and mistrust those who are different from us.
- So, there is this spiritual discipline of learning to know and love those who exist across the chasm from us.
- This chasm remains and was revealed in the news on Thursday.
- The gap between the wealthy and the poor in our country grew last year to its highest level in more than fifty years. Even the tax cut of 2017 resulted in larger gains for the wealthiest among us. Even the sustained economic growth favored those at the top. Our country is no different than what is pictured in this ancient parable from Jesus: those who feast sumptuously at black-tie dinners behind gated communities and those poor, sick, hungry, and neglected who sit outside the gates.
- One commentator on this passage of scripture concludes: the Parable invokes a realistic picture of too much of the world where the chasm between the rich and poor reflects gross injustice. Such things should not be. The sensitive listener is encouraged and stimulated to create a just society in which adequate care is extended to the poor.
- Will anyone listen?
- He said to them, “If they did not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”
- SERMON SONG: **GET TOGETHER BY THE YOUNGBLOODS**