

## ... And My Other Brother Lazarus

September 26, 2010 Firelands Presbyterian Church

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15 Psalm 91 1 Timothy 6:6-19 Luke 16:19-31

It's late at night, and you're flipping through channels, looking for a show that catches your eye. You flip past a couple of cartoons, a re-run of "The Love Boat," an earnest panel discussion of poverty in Zimbabwe, and a heck of a lot of commercials, and then suddenly, there it is. The show—really an infomercial—with the children in tattered clothes, with distended stomachs and big brown eyes. "Won't you help little Daya?" the announcer pleads. And as the camera locks in on those big brown eyes, those very sad eyes, "Daya's father died, and her mother is too ill to support her. Only \$28 a month will feed Daya, and clothe her and send her to school." And you're hooked.

Another night, again flipping through channels, you come across a commercial from the Humane Society? "Tilly spent her entire life in a wire cage," you hear, as the camera zooms in on the sad eyes of an emaciated dog. *Oh, Tilly!* you think.

Or you turn to your computer and find an email from a friend who has sent you an email about an organization called Kiva. "This is so cool," she gushes. "It's a microlending organization that allows people to make loans to small businesses all around the world. I'm helping a Kenyan man named Tsuma expand his tailoring business." *Wow, you think, that's really person-to-person. I want to do that too!*

Did you notice something about all three of those scenarios? In each one, the person (or animal) needing help has a name ... and a story. And we're introduced to them one at a time. I might not have paid any attention to this if I hadn't heard this week about a study done by a group called the Decision Science Research Institute. They were trying to determine at what point, when we hear about disasters and people suffering, we are overwhelmed by the statistics and big numbers.

[They] presented some people with the opportunity to donate to a starving girl named Rokia, and others to a starving boy named Moussa. People responded compassionately to their cause.

[They] then presented a third group of people with the opportunity to donate to both Rokia and Moussa, helping both of them equally. Surprisingly, people were less likely to donate anything at all when they were presented with two starving children.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://blog.onbeing.org/post/1155170719/helping-one-person-matters-more-than-saving-thousands>

Their conclusion to the question of how big a number is too big? Two.

We respond to one. One person, with a name and a story. But make it two, or a dozen, or 200, and our minds shut down.

- Make it 1.85 million (the number of people from Darfur who have fled their homes since fighting first broke out in February 2003)<sup>2</sup> ...
- or make it three million (people affected by the Haitian earthquake)<sup>3</sup> ...
- or six million (people affected by this summer’s flooding in Pakistan)<sup>4</sup> ...

and our minds shut down. All those poor people—numbers and faces whirl past on our internal video screens—so many that we cannot comprehend. And we are likely to turn away.

And maybe that was the problem for the rich man in our parable this morning from Luke. Maybe scores of people asked him for money on his way into town every morning, so his mind shut down. Maybe there were a dozen people tossed down at his gate, so many that he just didn’t notice them. At any rate, he had no relationship (that we know of) with poor people.

What we know about him is that he was very wealthy. He could wear purple and fine linen, and he could feast sumptuously every day. And we know that people of his time would have looked at his wealth and inferred that God had blessed him. This was a man rewarded by God—he must, therefore, be an amazingly good man. (We, on the other hand, live in a far more cynical age. When we hear of someone wearing the finest designer clothing and eating at only the very best restaurants, we tend to think the person is probably morally bankrupt. But at that time, wealth—even ostentatious wealth—was understood to be a signal that the person was right with God.) So we know that this man was wealthy and that people assumed he was righteous. But notice that we do not know his name.

The name we do know is that of Lazarus. This is the only person in any of Luke’s parables who’s given a name! And of course it’s not the Lazarus who was brother of Mary and Martha and whom Jesus raised from the dead. No, this is the other Lazarus. The other brother Lazarus. A real person. A poor person, and a sick person. A person in desperate need.

And then both men die. The rich man goes to Hades, where he is tormented in flames, and Lazarus goes to be with Abraham, father of the Jewish faith. The rich man calls to Father Abraham to send Lazarus to

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<sup>2</sup> Christian Science Monitor <http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0315/p07s02-woaf.html>

<sup>3</sup> Wikipedia [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/War\\_in\\_Darfur](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/War_in_Darfur)

<sup>4</sup> UN News Centre <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=35563>

him to comfort him, but Abraham says no—you had your good stuff during your lifetime, and besides, there’s this huge chasm between where you are and where we are, and it can’t be crossed. The rich man responds by asking Abraham to send Lazarus to his brothers, to warn them to repent, but Abraham says *no*. “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”

What are we supposed to get out of this parable?

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On the simplest level, the lesson would seem to be that those of us who have had great riches and comforts during our lives will be in torment for eternity, and those who have suffered on earth will be rewarded in the afterlife. Very tidy. Not very good news, for those of us who can wear purple and linen if we want to and who eat well every day. But very good news for the poor, for those who scramble for enough to eat and whose bodies display the scars of disease and malnutrition. And actually, in the gospel of Luke, this kind of reversal is a theme. Remember Mary’s song, the Magnificat?

“He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
<sup>53</sup> he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.

But that lesson is not good news for all people. It’s not *gospel*, which of course means good news. So we must look in a different direction.

Notice who it is who tells the rich man about the chasm between his place of torment and Lazarus’s spot—it’s Abraham. Abraham. Not God. It’s as if Luke is telling us that under the first covenant, the one that God instituted with Abraham, such a chasm may indeed exist. And Abraham, knowing of Moses and all the prophets between himself and the rich man and his brothers, is convinced that there is nothing that can convince the brothers to repent. “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets,” Abraham mocks, “neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”

If someone rises from the dead. Hmm. Who might that be? But of course, Jesus the Christ.

Christ Jesus is the one who bridges the chasm. Christ Jesus is the one sent across that chasm, bringing the word to us, the rich man’s brothers and sisters, that we might listen and be convinced, and that we might repent.

Repent. Understand differently. Turn a different way.

And in this case, that different way means bridging the chasm that exists here on earth between rich and poor. Which means that first we must notice the poor. For look, there's our brother Lazarus. He's been working at one of the hotels over the summer, but he's just learned that they're closing, and his job is disappearing. He's looking ahead to the winter and wondering how he's going to pay his utilities and his rent. And he's afraid that he's going to be hungry.

Oh, and look, there's another brother Lazarus, in Florida. He's 12 years old, and his parents have told him that this year he'll have to spend more time in the fields, picking tomatoes, because they cannot earn enough to support the family if he spends his time going to school. He's angry, but he's also resigned.

And oh, look, there's our other brother Lazarus, in Haiti. Since the earthquake he and his family have lived in a tent on the edge of a ravine outside Port-au-Prince. There are ugly sores on his back and arms, probably from the polluted water they bathe in, and he's afraid that he will never have a permanent home again.

We are being called, my friends, to pay attention to Lazarus. And to Letitia and Lisa and Luis. They are huddled outside our gates, with their ulcerated skin and their hungry bellies. It looks like there are too many of them to even be able to count, but wherever they are and whatever their names and stories are, they are our neighbors.

And we are being called to bridge the chasm that exists between the rich and the poor on earth. That means reaching out personally, and it also means advocating for systems that bring the Lazaruses inside the gates. Individually and as a local church, we can (and do!) feed the hungry here in Eastern Ottawa County. As a national church, we have been caring for the Lazaruses in Haiti. And in Florida, we have helped the local tomato pickers gain better wages—closer to living wages—for their work, so that the Lazaruses there can live healthy and whole lives.

One Lazarus ... or Daya or Tilly or Tsuma ... or dozens of Dayas, thousands of Tsumas, hundreds of Lazaruses. Someone has come back from the dead to tell us to repent, to think differently, to pay attention.

How blessed we are to have that opportunity.