

## “Go To Hell”

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver at  
First Congregational Church of Lebanon  
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Luke 16.19-31

*‘There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He 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.” But 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. Besides 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.” He said, “Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house— for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.” Abraham replied, “They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.” He said, “No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.” He 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.” ’*

After last week’s disorienting and disconcerting parable in which the conniving manager who seems to be engaged in fraud is held up not for condemnation but approbation (Luke 16.1-13) this week’s lesson is refreshingly straightforward. The rich guy who doesn't give a hoot about anybody else goes to Hell. The poor schmo who's had a hard-luck life is welcomed into the embrace of God. That's the way it should be, we think, right? The story is clear, it's straightforward, it all makes sense.

We've spent some time paying attention to Luke. We know that he's constantly reminding people that wealth can be a source of great danger because it can warp priorities and perspectives. We also know that when Jesus

goes to the trouble of sharing a parable, and one of the Evangelists includes it in the gospel, we should spend a little time with the text and we shouldn't just assume that a cursory reading will tell us everything we need to know.

I want to start by telling you a couple of things this text does not do. The first is, it does not even pretend to offer us an accurate description of what the after life looks like. This is meant to be a story that's meant to get us thinking about things. Ideas of what the afterlife looked like were floating around in the ancient world and if you read through the Hebrew Scriptures and you start dating the texts you can see there were changing notions. As the people of Israel had more interactions with cultures beyond their borders, they began to bring in other ideas and the concepts of the afterlife began to expand and develop and change and then that dynamic was adapted by Christianity and that continued to be flushed out and now we have the standard vision of Heaven as being the celestial wonderland and Hell of being a place of eternal torment. No one's been there and come back with a report so, truthfully, we don't know.

The second thing we should not take this text to say is don't worry about people who are suffering in this life because this life doesn't count. When we get to the 'real life', when we're with God, then those who have been abused and those who have suffered and those who have had to endure pain will receive a reward and all will be well and all will be good. Our Scriptures do not teach us anything like that. The Scriptures that Jesus studied and knew, the Hebrew Bible, tell us things like what we heard read from Amos earlier this morning (Amos 6.1a, 4-7). Those who are rich and powerful, those who have influence, should not be abusing other people. Ripping off those without influence is not okay and there will be a comeuppance. What we do in this life matters. It counts.

What then do we do with this text? What can we learn from it? I think there is the obvious lesson here that we need to be a bit more thoughtful about what we do with our resources than this rich man was. He seemed to have no trouble going out and buying the finest clothes and feasting all the time and enjoying all the good things life has to offer. He did all of this to the exclusion of the world around him. Think about what we hear. He's feasting every single day and right outside his door is Lazarus with his open sores. This suffering man is outside and our unnamed glutton doesn't care. He doesn't even notice.

Think about that. Think about that level of obtuseness. That willful obliviousness to what is going on right outside ones door.

The truly amazing thing, though, is that this guy continues to be as dense as a rock even when he has gone to Hell. There he is, experiencing his eternal torment, and he thinks that he is in a position to ask Abraham to tell Lazarus to go get him some water. That is so many flavors of wrong. He still thinks he's a big shot and now that he's finally noticed Lazarus, he thinks he's a nobody. He doesn't even have the decency to ask Lazarus for the water. He's got to go to Abraham, the person who matters.

This man's sin, in addition to his greed and his gluttony, was also his indifference and his skewed perspective. There's the moment where the light bulb goes on over his head. It seems to be fairly low wattage and pretty dim but at least he seems something needs his attention and he thinks about his brothers. They're apparently as unsavory a lot as he is. He asked Abraham to send a message.

Now, the narrative motif of a message being sent from the afterworld to the land of the living was a fairly common one in ancient literature. However, as is often the case with out Scriptures, things are done a little bit differently. Usually, the request for a transmission is granted. Not here. "No can do", Abraham says, "there's an unbridgeable chasm" - and the rich man panics. He worries about his siblings. Abraham says, "It's okay. They can go and consult Moses and the prophets. They've got Bibles." Well, actually, they had scrolls. But the point is this: they had Holy Scripture. They could go and consult that. The man, knowing his siblings well enough demurs, "That's not going to cut the mustard. We need an intervention. Maybe someone from the dead showing up at the doorstep will get their attention." Abraham replies, "Nope. If they're not going to pay attention to Scripture, they're not going to pay attention to a dead person who's been resurrected."

Now, Jesus tells a story like this and then Luke passes it on. There's an audience they have in mind. Right? This is not a transcript of something that happens in the 'Great Beyond', it's a story for the here and now. We are told this story by Luke *in the wake of the Crucifixion*.

Guess what? A dead man has come back to get our attention and to set us on the right way.

Guess what? All too often we're as dense and as thick as that rich man roasting in Hell.

Now, I'm not particularly worried about anybody here letting an ailing individual languish on his or her doorstep. But just because we're not going to succumb to extremely bad behavior doesn't mean we don't need to be mindful of what we do as those who claim to follow Jesus Christ.

As I was thinking about this issue of indifference, I concluded that this story has an application that is larger than the way we deal with money, as critical and as crucial as that is. The area of indifference that has been weighing on my mind, and I suspect on many of you in these recent days and weeks, is the incredibly unedifying conversation that we as a nation have been having around immigration. I'm embarrassed to be an American when I see the depths to which our conversation has fallen. I don't care if you're a liberal or a conservative; both sides have contributed to this national travesty.

I want us to think for a moment about one particular person. His name is Omran Daqneesh, he's five years old. Many of you probably recognize his name. He was a little boy in Aleppo whose photo appeared in media around the world. In there picture we see him sitting shell-shocked in a chair in an office and he's covered with dust and dirt. The image went viral. It was all over the Internet and everybody seemed to say, "Oh, this is horrible. How can we let this happen?" Then after a bunch of people pressing "Like" buttons on Facebook, things continued to fall apart in Syria.

Let me share a couple of statistics with you. Syria has a population of about 23 million people. Since the civil war broke out 400,000 people have died. Another 6.6 million people—think about that, that's more than a quarter of the population—has been internally displaced, so they're still in Syria but they've been driven out of their homes. Another 4.8 million people are not refugees. They've had to leave the country, heading to places like Jordan and Turkey and the Isle of Lesbos and so many are trying to get into Europe.' Syria is falling apart.

In the wake of this disaster, our country has accepted a few thousand refugees and there's a debate about whether or not we can accept 100,000. One of the arguments that's being raised for not accepting any more refugees than we already have is that if we do that we might let terrorists come into our country.

I cannot help but think about what I've read in scripture concerning who we're supposed to be. We are a people descended from a group of refugees, of aliens. We're never supposed to forget that. We're supposed to trust in God and not give into our fears. I use the word fear here because, get this, this is from the Cato Institute: Over a 40 year period, from 1975 to 2015, 3.25 million refugees have been accepted into our country. Of that number, a grand total of 20 have become terrorist and three, that's just three digits on one hand, have killed Americans on US soil. What that means is that the average American—that's you and me—has a 1 in 3.4 billion, that's billion with a "B", chance of being killed by a terrorist.

Most likely, your mom told you not to buy lottery tickets because the odds are bad. For example, Mega-millions offers odds of about 1 in 175,000,000 and whenever someone does buy one of those tickets the usual thought is, "I'm probably throwing away a buck but what the heck!" We know winning the jackpot is highly unlikely. Consider how much less likely then are the odds of being killed by a terrorist here on US soil.

Now I know people worry about these things because people have fears and I understand that. I don't want to be blown up and I've seen video of the aftermath of terror attacks on TV, indeed I saw the remains of the World Trade Center shortly after the 9/11 attacks, and these things can be scary but I can't go through life building up a wall around myself to hide from all the problems out there. That's becoming indifferent and becoming oblivious like the rich guy in Hell. It's not what God wants from us.

Let me share a different kind of communication with you. Some of you may have heard about this letter. It was sent to President Obama by a six year-old boy named Alex. This is one thing that Alex and the rich man have in common: they both appeal to an authority figure, someone who can maybe get something done. The rich man turns to Abraham, the boy to the president.

Here's what Alex wrote: "Dear President Obama. Remember the boy who was picked up by the ambulance in Syria? Can you please go get him and bring him to my home? Park in the driveway or on the street and we will be waiting for you guys with flags, flowers, and balloons. We will give him a family and he will be our brother. Catherine, my little sister, will be collecting butterflies and fireflies for him. In my school I have a friend from Syria, Omar, and I will introduce him to Omar and we can all play together. We can invite him to birthday parties and he will teach us another language. We can teach him English too, just like my friend Aoto from Japan. Please tell him that his brother will be Alex who is a very kind boy, just like him. Since he won't bring toys and doesn't have toys, Catherine will share her big blue stripey white bunny and I will share my bike and I will teach him how to ride it. I will teach him additions and subtractions in math and he can smell Catherine's lip gloss penguin which is green. She doesn't let anyone touch it. Thank you very much! I can't wait for you to come!"

I don't know what Alex's faith tradition is or indeed whether he has any but I'll take the liberty of saying, Alex is a Christian. He's much more of a Christian than many of our public leaders who are inciting fear and hate and indulging fears about the unknown. We as a people, as Americans, as Christians, can do a lot. We can handle some change. We can live up to our ideals. We can hear Luke and we can think about our choices and we can decide where we want to go. We can go to Hell or we can go the way of Jesus, which is the way to our salvation.