

"THE LAZARUS AT YOUR GATE"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
October 1, 1995

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INTRODUCTION

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"This mugging will in no way affect my decisions in this courtroom in matters of this kind....."

An elderly woman with rage glowing in her face stood up in the back of the room and said, "Then mug him again...." She wanted to make sure this judge got the message about the problems of crime in the streets of our city. "Mug him again!"

There was an old man who was trying to lead a stubborn donkey down a path. A passer-by happened to notice the trouble he was encountering...the way the donkey was behaving...and made a couple of comments to the man. Glancing his way, the owner said to the passer-by,

"Oh....I can make him do anything I want him to do with just a kind word or two." "Doesn't look like it to me" replied the passer-by. "Sure I can" said the owner.

Whereupon he climbed off the donkey, picked up a two-by-four beside the road and clobbered the poor animal on the head. He then explained to the astonished passer-by, "You see....I first simply have to get his attention".

DEVELOPMENT

I heard about a father who knelt down to tuck his little boy into bed. The little boy began to pray the prayer he had prayed so many times before....remember it?

"Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take...." But this time, however, he got things mixed up and it came out this way....

"If I should wake before I die...." "Oh, daddy...." he said with a bit of embarrassment..."I got it all mixed up...." Whereupon his wise father said, "Oh no, son... you said it right. My deepest longing for you is that you may wake up before you die!"

We continue with another text this morning taken from Luke's Gospel and let's think together for a little while about "waking up before we die", for some of us are asleep in some of the critical areas of life.

HABITUATION

Let me dig into this by introducing you to a phenomenon which psychologists and physiologists refer to as "habituation"...a good word to add to our vocabulary. Habituation. You've heard the example of the frog in the tea kettle. Drop a frog in boiling water and it will immediately hop out. But drop it in comfortable water and then slowly increase the temperature of the water and the frog will be swimming around in the boiling water before it realizes it. It has become habituated. Now scientists have measured the effects of habituation in the laboratory. Another example...

Repeat a sharp noise every five seconds. Then measure its effect on your consciousness. Your body will react dramatically to the first sound. The second sound will make less of an impression. And the third still less, as you become "habituated". In familiar terms, we would say that we have grown accustomed to the noise. We're "used" to it...that's habituation.

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If I were to ask you to close your eyes and then to describe this room, how well would you do? Which side is the American flag on and which side is the Christian flag on, or do we have any flags in the church? Some of you may have grown so accustomed to this place that you no longer really see it. You are habituated.

And a reverse example of habituation is what a Stanford University researcher has termed the "Bowery El Effect". A noisy elevated train used to run along Third Avenue here in our city. Raise a hand if you remember it? I remember it, although it was torn down back in the early fifties. The researcher writes that after it was torn down back around 1954,

"Many people in the neighborhood began to call the police quite late to report 'something strange' occurring...unusual noises, suspected thieves or burglars...the police determined that these calls took place at about the time the former late-night train would have passed by the houses of these people. What they were 'hearing' was the absence of the familiar noise of the train...."

They had grown habituated to this particular sound. Now they would have to become accustomed to its absence. Habituation. Growing so accustomed to something that we no longer realize it is there.

TODAY'S PARABLE

Now...let's take a closer look at today's scripture passage that Tara read earlier for us. Jesus said:

"Once there was a rich man...who 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 wounds." (Luke 16: 19, 20, 21)

What a story teller Jesus was. Note the contrast here between these two "characters" in this parable. "Rich man...purple...fine linen....luxury...gate" And then the beggar...."covered with sores...longing to eat...dogs came...licked his wounds". Jesus, I think, wanted us to see in our mind's eye, in a way we would never forget, the rich man living in splendor and poor Lazarus living in utter squalor.

Let me put a question before you to consider. Do you think that the rich man saw Lazarus lying there at his gate? I would like to think he did...at first. But then he probably became habituated to the presence of Lazarus. In other words, he became accustomed to seeing him there, and slowly with each passing day, each passing week, each passing year the very presence of Lazarus and his need made less and less of an impression on the rich man. And soon it was as if Lazarus wasn't even there. Can that happen to people...today? You bet it can. It can happen and it has happened to each of us. Our "heart-sight" is dimmed...

WHERE ARE WE IN THIS PARABLE?

You and I need to know that we are the rich, the well-off people in this story told by Jesus. I think that most of us here this morning are. We really are. We have far more in common with the rich man than we do with Lazarus. We live in comfortable homes. I can look down from this pulpit on just about any given Sunday and see people dressed "in purple and fine linen". Maybe some of you would not describe your lives as luxurious, but they really are. There are people in other countries who would think they had died and gone to heaven if they visited a salad bar in the average restaurant in this land.

And many of those things that you and I take for granted are really, at heart...luxuries. Our ancestors got along quite well withouts VCRs and Velcro, televisions and telephones, airplanes and air-conditioning. And the list goes on and on. Our homes are filled with all sorts of luxuries.

And we have our health, at least most of us do. Notice here that Lazarus I gather, couldn't even walk. He was "laid" at the rich man's gate. People who have good health are among the most fortunate people on earth. And we have people who love us. Family....friends. Most of us have been given a pretty good education. And for the most part we are attractive people. Certainly, the dogs do not lick our sores.

And so I offer this observation that you and I have more in common with the rich man than we do with Lazarus. And thus, Jesus comes up to us and then confronts us with the question: who is the Lazarus at our gate, the Lazarus at our corner? Who is it that has a legitimate claim on our attention? For this text is not about wealth and poverty. It is about sensitivity to those around us.

A WORLD FILLED WITH NEEDY PEOPLE

You see, the world is filled with needy people. And those needs are not always financial. People need love. They need recognition. They need encouragement. They need respect. Yes, they need a role model. They need a friend. They need a relationship with Christ. People have a list of needs that may go by unnoticed if we do not look in their direction.

A few years back there was a sad but very touching movie that was nominated for an EMMY. It was entitled Verna: USO Girl. Terry Hershey, I think it was, who told about it in her book, Go Away, Come Closer.

In this film, Sissy Spacek portrays a clumsy, tone-deaf song and dance girl hired by a USO troupe because no one else is available. Verna neither sings on key nor taps with the beat, but she is utterly convinced that her destiny is stardom. She is sure that when she dies thousands will attend her funeral. Their memories of her will make her immortal.

Verna does not become a star, but she does make a hit with a certain GI who falls madly in love with her. And though Verna returns his love, she decides she cannot disrupt her promising career to marry him and so the show goes on...

Verna pushes herself to perform during a battle when everyone else is too scared to move. Nothing will discourage her from fulfilling her destiny and achieving the stardom she feels is just around the corner. Not her lack of talent. Nor

even the love of her young GI boy friend. But finally, however, Verna is killed by a land-mine. An Army Public Relations officer hears about her tragic death - the first USO girl to die in action. He decides that her story just might boost morale and so he gets her story "out". He arranges for foreign dignitaries to attend Verna's funeral. Bands march behind the casket. Sadly, no one knows her name. Having rejected love in pursuit of success, she dies without either. But she does have a big funeral and lots of folks come to it.

Verna, in her own way, was every bit as needy as Lazarus. Her needs, of course, were psychological and emotional, but they were just as real. There are needy people all around us. They are our neighbors....the people we work with, the people we love. They are there....at our gate, or near our desk, or near us in the pew.

WHO IS THE LAZARUS AT YOUR GATE?

And the question we face is: who is the Lazarus at your gate, at your door? It may be your spouse, or it may be a teenager in your family. Those of you who have children growing up in your household....remember that "growing up" is never easy. It takes a lot of love and a lot of patience. I was once comforted to read that in order to "become a gentleman" that Mohandas Gandhi - in his late teens - spent hours practicing the arranging of his hair and his tie and taking lessons in dance and music. It's nice to know that such a great man once experienced the awkwardness of youth....as did we all.

Some older folks were dining at a restaurant and one of them said it would be nice if "you could turn back the clock and live life over". Said one of them,

"Well....you know what I'd like....I'd like to be 18 years old again and to know what I now know". At this moment, a waitress who had been clearing the table stopped what she was doing and said...."I'm 18....what is it you know?"

Young people....and we have a number of them growing up here in our church... need to have the benefit of our experience. They need for us to listen to them without judging them....and not only young people need that gift....a lot of not-so-young people can do with a listening and caring heart...without judging them. Then, and only then, can some real communication take place. Who is your Lazarus.

Some of you who know your Bible will recall how this story ends. Both Lazarus and the rich man die. Lazarus goes to heave, but not the rich man. He goes to that special place reserved for the "insensitive" of this world and he's really amazed at just how warm...indeed, how hot...his new home is!

He cries out:

"Father Abraham...have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue..." But Father Abraham says that is not possible. "Then I beg you, says the rich man...."Send Lazarus to my father's house, for I have five brothers...let him warn them...." Abraham replies, "They have Moses and the Prophets. Let them listen to them." "No, Father Abraham" says the rich man...."but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent." Father Abraham replied, "If they do not listen to Moses and

the Prophets....they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

CONVINCED ABOUT WHAT?

"Convinced"....about what? Caring for the needy?
Living a righteous life? Having faith in Christ?

Jesus doesn't say. Maybe it is to convince them to "wake up before they die". Maybe that's the warning that Christ is sending us. "To wake up before we die" Maybe He is trying to help us see that there is someone who needs our attention, someone out there in the world, or in our neighborhood, or in our office, or in our church, or someone in our own home. It may be someone we pass by every day.

CLOSING STORY

There's an old story about a botanist who was studying the heather bell found in the highlands of Scotland. While looking through his microscope at this beautiful flower, he was approached by a shepherd who asked what he was doing. Rather than trying to explain, the botanist invited the shepherd to look through his microscope and observe for himself. When the shepherd saw the wonder of the flower, he exclaimed,

"My God....and I have been tramping on them all my life!"

That may be the word of warning we need to hear. Wake up...before you die. Look around you. Pay attention. You may be tramping on the heart of someone nearby.... I invite you as you receive the sacrament here this morning, be thinking about who the Lazarus is at your gate...at your door and then depart determined to do something about him or her. Do something before it's too late.

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your presence, O God, in these moments here in this church this day. Wrestle with us in the dark and shadowy corners of our lives where indifference and apathy and unconcern may have settled in. Confirm within the decisions of these moments...the resolutions and the intentions that may be forming.

Visit our sick with the quiet assurance of Your care. Their names are known to you. Encircle the bereaved with Your warming, healing presence. Point out some markers along the trail for those who have lost their way. Douse with the cold waters of common sense any who might this very day be on the verge of some destructive action or unhealthy decision. The race is so short, O God...even at its longest and we would try to run it well....and always to Your glory.

In the name and spirit of Christ, we now pray. Amen.

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