

September 25, 2022  
Pentecost 16  
Luke 16:19-31  
“Unknown No More”

The National War Memorial in Ottawa includes the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, in which are interred the remains of an unidentified Canadian soldier who died in France during the First World War. This unnamed soldier’s remains were selected from a Commonwealth War Grave near Vimy, near where the Battle of Vimy Ridge took place. The Tomb is intended to honour the approximately 116,000 Canadians who have died in combat, as well as all members of the Canadian Armed Forces who have served our nation. The Tomb has become a focal point for Remembrance Day ceremonies, where attendees place their poppies on the tomb. While the name of this soldier will never be known, the Tomb is a reminder that many have died in battle whose identity is known only to God.

Sadly, there are many people besides the soldier buried in Ottawa who are unknown, unseen, and unloved in life and in death. In New York City, there is a burial ground known as Potter’s Field where unclaimed bodies are buried. There are people who live without family or friends, people who go unnoticed in their daily lives, people who yearn for the human connection that many of us take for granted. As the Beatles asked in *Eleanor Rigby*, “*All the lonely people, where do they all come from? All the lonely people, where do they all belong?*”

The man who languished outside the gates of the rich man in today's Gospel lesson was one of those lonely people who was unseen in life, unknown to anyone in his community, and who "*died and was buried along with his name*" – were it not for Jesus making him the central character in his parable and identifying him as Lazarus, the only person in any of Jesus' parables given a name. This parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus pulls back the curtain on the fate of a person who chooses to serve mammon rather than wealth, not heeding our Lord's warning that "*you cannot serve God and wealth.*" (Luke 16:13). The parable serves as the capstone of Luke's prophetic critique of wealth in his Gospel. In the Magnificat, Mary declared in her praise of God that "*he brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly*" (1:52). Lazarus' exaltation to the bosom of Abraham vividly fulfills John the Baptist's warning that "*God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham*" (3:8), while the rich man's torment fulfills the warning that "*the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire*" (3:17). The Kingdom of God belongs to the poor and the hungry, but woe to those who are rich and are full now:

- "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets." – 6:24-26.

The audience for this parable is the Pharisees, who are identified as "*lovers of money*" and who ridiculed Jesus' declaration that one cannot serve both God and

wealth. The Pharisees found in Deuteronomy and other texts teachings that they believed justified their wealth as a sign of righteousness:

- “Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field. Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb, the fruit of your ground, and the fruit of your livestock, both the increase of your cattle, and the issue of you flock. Blessed shall be your basked and your kneading-bowl. Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out.” – Deuteronomy 28:3-6.

What the Pharisees appear to have forgotten is that the Torah specifically requires that the harvest be shared with the poor and the transient:

- “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien; I am the LORD your God.” – Leviticus 19:9-10.

Jesus addresses his parable to the Pharisees *“not simply on the issue of wealth and poverty but on a justification of their view on the basis of the law and the prophets.”*

(Fred Craddock). The Pharisees were not alone in their belief that wealth was a reward for righteousness; it was common to equate wealth with virtue. Good people who work hard and live righteously can expect to be rewarded with means; likewise, people with means are seen as good because they were able to acquire wealth. *“In the ancient world, concepts like wealth, virtue, and masculinity worked together and reinforced one another to solidify elite status.”* (Kendra A. Mohn).

The commonly accepted belief about wealth and righteousness is challenged in Jesus’ parable which introduces *“a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine*

*linen and who feasted sumptuously every day.*” (16:19). The measure of this unnamed rich man’s wealth (some translations identify him as “Divas,” which is Latin for “rich man,” but this identification has been dismissed by biblical scholars) is illustrated by his conspicuous consumption in both his dress and his diet. He dressed in purple, signifying that he was a high-ranking official or a member of the royal family. He lived in a house with gates, dressed in fine linen, and ate sumptuously every day. He was “*at ease in Zion*” (“*Woe to those who are at ease in Zion*” – Amos 6:1); he had everything a person could want. The story will quickly make clear, however, that the glitter of the rich man’s life was superficial and transient; it had nothing to do with the eternal glory that surrounds the Lord.

At the gates of the rich man’s house, a short distance from where he sat in the lap of luxury, sat a man whose circumstances could not have been more different: “*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.*” (6:20-21). The name “Lazarus” comes from *Eleazar*, which means “God helps,” and therefore foreshadows the poor man’s fate. Tragically, no one helps or even notices Lazarus; he lives unseen and unknown. He is a crippled beggar whose body is covered with running sores. He is so desperately hungry that he would have gladly filled himself with the soiled bread that fell from the rich man’s table; the verb “to eat” (*chortazo*) was commonly used for the feeding of animals

rather than humans (*“And the rest were killed by the sword of the rider on the horse, the sword that came from his mouth, and all the birds were gorged with their flesh.”* – Revelation 19:21) and for the longings of the hungry (*“He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.”* – 15:16). At the feast, bread was used to wipe the grease from one’s hands and then was thrown under the table (*“Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”* – Mark 7:28). The depth of Lazarus’ deprivation is seen as the dogs lick his sores. It would not have taken much for the rich man to extend a small act of kindness to the poor man at his gate; *“scraps and leftovers from the sumptuous feasting would have made all the difference.”* (Mohn). But whether it is intentional, the rich man chooses not to notice the presence of Lazarus and his need; he fails to keep the commandment to *“love your neighbour as yourself”* (Leviticus 19:18).

The parable takes a sudden turn when at death the rich become poor, and the poor become rich. Lazarus dies first and *“was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham”* (19:22). The rich man also dies and is simply buried. Neglected by others, Lazarus is prized in the sight of God; while the rich man will learn what Jesus meant when he stated that *“you are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God.”* (16:15). While Lazarus has been taken by the angels to the “bosom of Abraham,” which was regarded as the place of highest bliss,

the rich man finds himself in Hades, the place where the dead awaited final judgment:

- “These beautiful corners are here in order that the spirits of the souls of the dead should assemble into them – they are created so that the souls of the children of the people should gather here. They prepared these places in order to put them there until the day of their judgment and the appointed time of the great judgment upon them ... And in the manner in which the souls of the righteous are separated by this spring of water with light upon it, in like manner, the sinners are set apart when they die and are buried in the earth and judgment has not been executed upon them in their lifetime.” – 1 Enoch 22.

Finding himself in a place of torment, the rich man looks up and sees “*Abraham far away with Lazarus at his side*” (16:23). A dialogue ensues between the rich man and Abraham. Lazarus, who never asked for anything on earth, never says anything; Abraham now speaks for the beggar who previously had no one to advocate for him. The rich man cries out to Abraham to “*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.*” (16:24). The rich man still regards Lazarus as someone who is available to serve his personal needs. But Abraham does not acquiesce to his request; he addresses the rich man as “child,” but being a child of Abraham is no guarantee that one will dwell with Abraham in paradise (“*Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able form these stones to raise up children to Abraham*” – 3:8). Abraham instructs the rich man to “*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.*” (16:25). Remembering can either

be part of one's torment or part of one's salvation; at the empty tomb on Easter morning, the angels encouraged the women to "*remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.*" (24:6). In life the beggar got only cast-off goods and was treated shamefully. Now the man's fates are reversed, fulfilling the reversal of fortune in the Beatitudes: "*Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled ... Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry*" (6:21, 25). Abraham is informing the rich man that "*Lazarus ain't gonna run no mo' yo' errands, rich man!*" (Clarence Jordan).

The rich man in life could have come to Lazarus' aid at any time; it was a short walk that separated the two men, and the mere act of opening his gates to the man at need would have made all the difference. Now, however, "*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*" (16:26). The chasm that separates the rich man from Abraham and Lazarus prevents Lazarus from responding to the rich man's torment with compassion and removes any possibility that the rich man might escape his torment. "*The rich man has shut himself off from Lazarus, and no one can reach him.*" (Alan Culpepper).

For the first time, the rich man is thinking of someone other than himself when he asks Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his five brothers "*so that they do not come*

*into this place of torment*” (16:28). If there is no hope for him, at least he may be able to intervene and spare his brothers the fate he is suffering; assumed in this request is that his brothers are as selfish and uncaring for the needs of others as he was during his lifetime. But once again Abraham denies his request to have Lazarus do his bidding; instead, he replies that *“they have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them”* (16:29). The reference here is to the teachings in both the Torah and the prophets concerning how God’s people are to care for persons in need in their midst:

- “If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbour.” – Deuteronomy 15:7.
- “Is this not the fast I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?” – Isaiah 58:6-7.

The rich man, however, has no hope that his brothers will *“listen to them”* and heed the teachings of the Scriptures. His last hope for them is that *“if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.”* (16:30). He thinks that only the spectacle of a dead man’s return will shock his brothers out of their complacency. But Abraham’s final response add finality to the urgency of hearing Moses and the prophets: *“If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”* (16:31). There will be no special

dispensation for those who refuse the needs of the poor who are at their gates. *“If they will not hear the Scripture and be merciful, they show that they have placed themselves beyond the reach of God’s mercy.”* (Culpepper).

While the parable focuses on the reversal of fortunes between the rich man and Lazarus and how the rich man’s selfishness and inattention to the needs of others placed him beyond the reach of God’s mercy, what is often overlooked is the role of the brothers in this story. The warning to the brothers about hearing the Word of God and living in obedience to God’s commands about loving one’s neighbours as oneself is a word of caution to all of us who hear this parable, all of us who are called as disciples to hear the Word of God and walk in obedience to God’s call to *“love one another as I have loved you”* (John 13:35). If we are to serve God rather than wealth, we must always see the wealth with which we have been entrusted as a means of serving others rather than walling ourselves off from those in need. We are to recognize as the Church of Christ that *“across the world, across the street, the victims of injustice dry for shelter and for bread to eat, and never live before they die,”* and that as those called to serve all people, following the example of our Lord Jesus, that *“we have no mission but to serve in full obedience to our Lord; to care for all, without reserve, and spread his liberating word”* (ELW Hymn 729). We are called to be a Servant Church, following the example of our Lord who came *“not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many”* (Mark 10:45).

- “Jesus sends forth his disciples not as holders of power or as masters of a law. He sends them forth into the world asking them to live in the logic of love and selflessness. The Christian message is transmitted by embracing those in difficulty, by embracing the outcast, the marginalized, and the sinner.” – Pope Francis.

The unknown soldiers and all those who are buried along with their names may have been forgotten in life, but like Lazarus they are called by name by our Lord in whose eyes all are precious children. In Baptism God calls us by name and gives us the identity as “child of God,” and “*neither life nor death shall ever from the Lord his children sever*” (ELW Hymn 781). As we have been called by name in the assurance that we are unknown no more, may we look upon everyone we meet not as unknown persons who no one notices and for whom no one cares; may we look upon each person as precious in the eyes of the Lord, and may we share that which God entrusts to us so that all may know the blessings of our Lord who came that all God’s children “*may have life, and have it abundantly.*” (John 10:10).

Amen.