

WHY GOD EXPECTS JUSTICE

a sermon based on

Amos 6:4-14

Luke 16:19-31

by the Rev. Dr. Stephen R. Hanning

First Congregational United Church of Christ

2524 Rockefeller, Everett, WA 98201

30 September 2007

What parable would make a man with three doctoral degrees (one in medicine, one in theology and one in philosophy) leave the comfort of his own home with all its amenities, leave his community, his country, his own culture and depart for the jungles of Africa? What parable could induce a man, who was recognized as one of the best concert organists in all of Europe, go to a place where there were no organs to play. What parable would so intensely motivate a man that he would give up a teaching position in Vienna, Austria to go and deal with people who were suffering from diseases and conditions that modern science could treat, and in some cases, prevent. That man was Dr. Albert Schweitzer. And the single parable that so radically altered his life, by his own testimony, was the Gospel lesson we just heard this morning: the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. The Rich Man and Lazarus were actually neighbors. They probably saw each other every day. Oh, not socially, but every day the Rich Man saw this beggar at his front gate. Who were they really? For the rich man, we shall use the Latin term that has been used for centuries, *Dives* [pronounced 'Dive-ees'] which actually means "Rich Man." He was self-indulgent. He was probably a connoisseur, a lover of the arts, one who knew and appreciated fine wine and superb cuisine. We are told in vs. 19 that he habitually dressed in purple. Purple was known as the color of royalty because it was the most expensive dye in the ancient world. Only the upper echelon and the high priest of the temple were allowed to wear it or could even afford it. We are also told that his undergarments were made of fine linen.

The other man in the story is Lazarus. The reason *Dives* and Lazarus were neighbors and probably saw each other every day is that Lazarus was homeless. We are also told in vs. 20 that he was a cripple. Lazarus could barely make it from day to day, living off the leftovers thrown out the window of *Dives'* palace. But for all the challenges he faced, for all his suffering, Lazarus did all he could to survive.

As the story goes, one day, both men died. Death, after all, is the great equalizer. Death does not care about one's wealth, one's nationality, or one's social standing in the community. Lazarus, said Jesus, was carried away by the angel of death to heaven, where he occupied a seat of honor next to Abraham. About *Dives*, the rich man, all that Jesus says is that he was buried. That is all he said. But we may

assume that his funeral was elegant affair. Oh, Jesus did add one additional fact about Dives death that may be of interest to us. His soul was sent to hell.

The rest of the parable tells how awful it was for Dives. He could see Lazarus in paradise right next to Abraham and he asked Abraham to send Lazarus “to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.”

[Luke 16:24]

This parable must have shocked his listeners, even perhaps his closest disciples but that was the most effective way to get his point across, and that point is, God expects justice from God’s people. It isn’t as if they had never heard such things before. Jesus was, after all, deeply rooted in the prophetic tradition of the ancient Hebrew prophets, all who were familiar to faithful Jews of Jesus’ day and all who declared, as if with one voice, God expects justice from God’s people!

First, God expects justice because God’s grace is freely bestowed upon all people but many think that because they have more in this life, they deserve more because God loves them more than those who have less. Jesus’ parable demonstrates how God reverses that notion. Notice that the rich man in Jesus’ story is never actually named. The early church writers gave him the name of Dives. In the parable only the poor man has a name. That is exactly the opposite of how the world does it.

We all know the names of the rich. We know the Donald Trumps, the Sam Waltons, the Warren Buffets, the Bill Gates of the world. We know about, and many of us long for, the lifestyle of these and other rich and famous folk. With the poor it is exactly the opposite. They are not named. We refer to them collectively as “the poor”, “the homeless,” “the third world,” or “people on welfare.” They are the neighbors most people never meet. In the recent past, African Americans who worked as domestics in white homes were known only by their first names. Before, when their ancestors were slaves, it was illegal in the South for slaves to have a last name in order to maintain the despicable lie that the slaves were subhuman. That was the standard of the world. There are many communities in this country that had cemeteries referred to as potters’ field, where the poor were buried for nothing.

Frequently, one of the rules was that there could be no markers. Only small numbers marked each grave. No names were allowed. Even in death, the poor were denied their own humanity. Jesus said that God reverses the world’s order. God knows the name of every one, including every poor and disenfranchised person who ever walked on this earth. But Jesus was also saying that there is a special place in God’ heart for the poor. God could care less if we have a lot of money or occupy a higher level of social status. But God does care about those who are poor.

You can be poor in the eyes of the world, but your value in the eyes of God is beyond our wildest imagination. That is what Jesus is suggesting here. In heaven everything will be reversed. Maybe that is what troubled Albert Schweitzer. A man who belonged to the privileged class but felt uncomfortable with his wealth and station in life when so many who were poor lacked even the basic necessities of life. Secondly, God expects justice because we should love our neighbor as we love

ourselves. This story is troubling to some because Dives was not a mean man. It might be easier to justify Dives' ultimate destination if he were an abusive and brutal man. But, in fact, Dives never intentionally mistreated Lazarus. He never kicked him. He never chased him away. He never lectured him about getting up and getting a job. Even so, Dives was ushered into the fires of hell while scabby, ulcerated, dirty old Lazarus was welcomed into the heavenly gates .

Why? What did Dives do that was so horrible that he should deserve such a terrible fate?" Well, we may assume that he felt as though it was supposed to be that way.

He accepted all the material wealth and his high estate without question. It never occurred to him that the fate that Lazarus' status at birth and the fate of his own status at birth might have been changed. He could have helped Lazarus more than tossing him scraps from his table. But no, Dives was indifferent: Indifferent to his plight, indifferent to his hunger, indifferent to his needs. They were the proverbial neighbors who never met. I have a story. Some years ago before the death of Mother Theresa, a television special depicted the grim human conditions that were a part of her daily life. It showed all the horror of the slums of Calcutta and her love for these destitute people. The producer interviewed her as she made her rounds in that dreadful place. Throughout the program commercials interrupted the flow of the discussion. Here is the sequence of the topics and commercials: lepers (bikinis for sale); mass starvation (designer jeans); agonizing poverty (fur coats); abandoned babies (ice cream sundaes) the dying (diamond watches). It became apparent that the producers of the program were demonstrating a cold disregard for the meaning and substance of Mother Teresa's ministry to the poor. They used Mother Teresa to promote the things that the world values, not what God values.

On television, we are occasionally presented with images of the poor man Lazarus at our gate but the intervening commercial reminds us of the next car we ought to buy or the next gourmet meal we should eat. We are carefully and methodically told it is O.K. to live our life of luxury while others live their life of poverty. Dives was the man who not only didn't love his neighbor, he didn't even see him.. Third, God expects justice because we are the body of Christ. If we don't bring justice to the Lazaruses of the world, who will? We are told that Dives begged Abraham to send him back to earth so he could warn his five brothers. Clearly, they were on the same path as he had been. But Abraham told him, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them." Now why couldn't Jesus have let the story end like Charles Dickens' "*A Christmas Carol*"? In that story Morley, Scrooge's business partner, came to him with a stern warning of what would happen if he continued his to be greedy and uncaring about the poor of the world. In Scrooge's case, it worked. When he realized that because of his unwillingness to pay a decent salary to his clerk, his crippled son would die at a very young age and when he saw that when he died no one would mourn his death, much worse, everyone would be

glad he died, he decided that he needed to change his ways. But Jesus didn't give his parable a nice, cozy ending. Dives' request was flatly denied. In the parable, Abraham said that Dives' brothers had the word of God to warn them and if they ignored the word of God, then even a resurrected Moses would not be able to convince him. Besides, says Abraham, there is a big chasm, that cannot be bridged. What is that chasm that cannot be bridged and who put it there? Dives did not simply die and go to hell. He had also created his own hell on earth by closing his eyes to the suffering of his fellow human beings. The hell he experienced in death was merely a continuation of what he had made of his life.

In his book, *The Four Loves*, C. S. Lewis wrote, *"To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket – safe, dark, motionless and airless – it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable... The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers ...of love is hell. [p. 169]*

God expects justice because God's grace is freely bestowed upon all people.
God expects justice because we should love our neighbor as we love ourselves.
God expects justice because we are the body of Christ.
And, as Jesus frequently said after his parables, "Go, thou and do likewise."
And let the people say, "Amen."