

Feed Each Other  
Preacher: Rev. Jill Olds  
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21:51

Let us pray. Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts and minds together be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer, through Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

I come from a family that places a high value on traveling. My parents both knew several languages and had lived abroad, so the experience of broadening one's horizons was instilled within my brother and me from the get-go. Some of my earliest childhood memories were of family road trips, filled to the brim with visits to National Parks, historic battlefields, and stunningly gorgeous scenery. I've since hit all 50, but by the time I was ten, I had visited some 40-odd states, all of the Canadian provinces and territories, and a very healthy chunk of Western Europe. High school saw me learning two languages, with study abroad trips to Germany and Spain. And so, it would come as a surprise to no one that I wanted to study abroad in college. But I had already been to Europe, so I was more interested in doing something outside the box. I was fortunate to be able to enroll in a program called Semester at Sea. Participants in SAS take a cruise ship that has been converted into what they call a "floating university;" the ship sails around the entire world, and stops in different countries along the way. While in the middle of the oceans—yes, that's oceans, because we go through three—students take classes on the ship, that cater themselves to the countries they visit. It's a fabulous program, and I would be more than happy to share more with anyone who would be interested in learning more—just from those three months, I have enough sermon illustrations to last me my entire ministerial career. But of all the places I saw, few left as strong an impression as my time in India. India has often been referred to as a "country of contrasts." India is a country rich with history, with colors, with extraordinary fruits and other food, rich with life lived. But it is also a place racked by the underbelly of life. The poverty I witnessed was pervasive and mind-blowing. Beggars everywhere—in the city, in the country, everywhere. The smell of human body odor, the deplorable physical ailments, the pushing and shoving and begging and yelling... it was all everywhere. Everywhere, that is, until I walked into our grand, gated, larger-than-life hotel. Vaulted ceilings. Luxury cafes and boutiques inside. The place could have been the size of an airport. Rooms so luxurious I didn't dare breathe. The contrast from the noisy, overcrowded streets and the quiet, lush, extravagant hotel was very, very stark, dizzying and overwhelming. Our group complained that we could have—indeed, should have—stayed in less affluent quarters. But, one wise, well-traveled person among us remarked, "Here in India, it's either the Plaza, or the shacks." A nation of contrasts. It was almost as though I was dancing between two worlds—the world of sheer abundance, and the world of nothing.

Today's passage could very well be described as a story of contrasts, of a man who has it all, contrasted with a man who has absolutely nothing. We are told that a man named Lazarus lives at the gate of a rich man, who remains unnamed in our story. The distance between them is both enormous, and small—they are close to one another in proximity, but in reality, could not live any farther apart. (As an aside, Lazarus is the only character in all of Jesus' parables who is given a name. The name Lazarus literally means, "whom God helps," which is a fitting description for both what happens next, and for what does not happen.) The rich man is clothed in finery reserved for the royalty of Jesus' day, and his eating reflects this lavish living as well. Lazarus, by contrast, is "clothed" in open sores, and has no food. Almost like the start of a bad joke, they both die and we are told that the rich man goes down into Hades, and Lazarus is with Abraham. Being in the "bosom of Abraham" was considered to be the most blissful resting place one could attain, reserved for the martyrs of the faith, so Lazarus is being elevated to the most honorable position possible. But what is Hades? It's very easy to impose

a sort of “heaven-hell” dichotomy onto this passage—certainly our 21st century ears might hear it this way—but that was not the 1st century understanding of an afterlife. In Jesus’ day, Hades was considered simply a place of the dead, where they awaited judgment, and was sometimes thought of as having different rooms, according to people’s morals. So scholars have debated about whether both Lazarus and the rich man are in Hades, or whether Lazarus has risen...elsewhere. But really, the point is that while there is a divide between the two men, they can also see one another and interact. Very interesting.

The rich man chooses to interact by saying this, “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.” Did you catch that? For starters, the rich man doesn’t speak to Lazarus directly, but instead asks Abraham to send him over—just as in life, here too in death, he acts as though Lazarus weren’t even there. Secondly, he is asking Lazarus to serve him once again—this time, to leave his comfortable dwelling with Abraham in order to enter the flames instead. This is what Abraham objects to, as he reminds the rich man that Lazarus is done with serving, and now has received his due reward of comfort. But here’s the kicker for me: the rich man asks for Lazarus by name. As in, he knows him. As in, he likely knew his name when he was a penniless beggar living outside the rich man’s gated community. Friends, this is not a story about the nameless poor halfway around the world, or about sending our money and aid to country x. This is about the poor right outside our gates. This is about the people whose names we know, who could use some help. Note here too that the rich man is not disdainful or abusive towards Lazarus—he’s not a cruel man, at least not outwardly. He just ignores him, both in this life and in the one after. I’m sure most of us don’t try to do this, but how often do we forget to send that sympathy card, or make that meal, or ask “How are you doing, really?” instead of merely waving on our way to the next busy thing on our schedule. I can imagine the rich man heading out of his gates, on a leisurely walk perhaps, or on his way to synagogue, or whatever, and waving a casual, “Hey Lazarus!” greeting towards the man he sees. But without any compassion, without any actual care, without actually seeing this starving, bereaved man.

And, like it or not, Scripture tells us that that has consequences, and eternal consequences at that. Abraham explains, “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.” This can sound like judgmental condemnation, but I don’t believe it is intended to, for one very distinct reason: in addressing the rich man, Abraham uses the word, “teknon.” Teknon is the Greek word for child. It is an intimate word, a word that connotes strong connections and relationships. Abraham addresses the rich man with teknon. Friends, we are all children in the eyes of God. We are all intimately loved. The chasm that this parable references—might it be a chasm of the heart? Might it be a manmade chasm, a chasm that neither Abraham nor Lazarus can cross because it has been years in the making, dug little by little, shovelful at a time, every time the rich ruler chose to look away from others in need? This is sort of like Jacob Marley in A Christmas Carol, who bore the chains he forged in life. Might the distance between Lazarus and the rich man be actually of the rich man’s choosing? Put another way, do we actually create our own hell?

Hell is often defined as separation from God. For by separating himself from Lazarus, his fellow brother in Christ, so too did the rich man separate himself from God. We could get into a fascinating discussion about our various theologies on hell—the Scriptures actually have precious little to say about the afterlife. They remain far more concerned about this life, which is why, despite some creative wrapping, I think this story has a lot more to say about how we live our lives now, today, rather than being an accurate representation of the afterlife. In terms of our life, here and now, this passage drives home why connection to one another is so hugely important. Every week we gather here, we are remembering Who brings us to this place. We are remembering that we are called to see the Christ in one another—“Whoever does this for the least of these, does it for me,” says Jesus. So by the same token, distance from a

community can often lead to a distance from God. This is the chasm we make when we ignore the needs in one another: by not caring for each other, we run the risk of not caring for Christ. And that has consequences: in how we see the world, and in our relationship with God.

The rich man ends his pleas by asking Abraham to then send Lazarus to his brothers who are still alive, so that they may be warned. True to form, Abraham refuses, saying that those who are still alive—and this includes us—have already been given the guidance we need; if we don't heed that call, we're hardly going to be persuaded by anything else, not even a visit from another world. On this passage, Presbyterian minister Helen Montgomery DeBevoise writes, "The end of this parable pushes us back across the chasm into the earthly world. "Break through!" shouts the man, but in fact, God has already broken through with [God's] word through the prophet's...and...in Christ. People have been given what they need to live faithful lives. They will listen, or they will not. They will respond, or they will not."

I remain of the opinion that eternal life is not something that happens to us when we die. We are resurrected people NOW, thanks to Jesus Christ. Jesus has already brought eternal life to us, and we are called to live into that reality. Friends, we have been given all we need: God in Jesus has broken through the chasm. He has conquered death. Life has won. Love has won. The only chasms that remain are those of our own creation, when we choose to live into the contrasts in our world, when we choose to separate ourselves from God, and from one another.

One final story for all of us to ponder this morning. This anonymous parable may be familiar to some of you, but it is well worth revisiting:

One day a man said to God, "God, I would like to know what Heaven and Hell are like." God showed the man two doors. Inside the first one, in the middle of the room, was a large round table with a large pot of stew. It smelled delicious and made the man's mouth water, but the people sitting around the table were thin and sickly. They appeared to be famished. They were holding spoons with very long handles and each found it possible to reach into the pot of stew and take a spoonful, but because the handle was longer than their arms, they could not get the spoons back into their mouths. The man shuddered at the sight of their misery and suffering. God said, "You have seen Hell."

Behind the second door, the room appeared exactly the same. There was the large round table with the large pot of wonderful stew that made the man's mouth water. The people had the same long-handled spoons, but they were well nourished and plump, laughing and talking. The man said, "I don't understand." God smiled. "It is simple," God said. "Love only requires one skill. These people learned early on to share and feed one another. While the greedy only think of themselves..."

So, how are we doing at this? How is Pilgrim Congregational Church doing at caring for one another, at making the contrasts in our lives less stark? How are we doing at knowing the people in need in our community, and in responding to that need with actual help and compassion? How are we doing at feeding one another? Are we working towards eradicating the chasms in our lives, are we living as resurrected people? If we are not, be aware, says Jesus, that there are consequences. May we continue to try to live as resurrected people, and may we endeavor to see the Christ in one another. In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.