MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

"The Story of Separation"

A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church on Sunday October 2, WCS from Luke 16:19-31

So, there I was on an island in the Caribbean laying on a beach at a private resort reading a book on the history of inequality. This is not a joke. I certainly wish it was, but sadly it's true. During sabbatical my wife and I went to St. Lucia, and while there I read *The Dawn of Everything,* a 526-page tome written by two British anthropologists with a bright florescent orange cover. The exquisite irony of an entitled white American reading a book about inequality while lying on a beach in the Caribbean was not lost on me. I did think about how ridiculous I must have looked, but I've grown so accustomed to looking ridiculous at this point in my life that I thought "What's does it matter? Just lean into it. You're a super nerd. Embrace it. You can day drink all the mojitos you want, and nothing is ever going to change that!"

The real dilemma was that I could not put the book down. Perhaps it was being far away from home as an outsider in a strange land among the ancestors of the Arawaks and Hewanorra peoples. Whatever it was I was captivated by the way the author's used examples of critiques of European society by indigenous people. A French priest Father Bard, assigned to "evangelize" the Mi'kmaq (Mee g-mahk) nation in Nova Scotia, once commented, "The native people tell us, 'You are always fighting and quarrelling among yourselves; we live peaceably. You are envious and slander each other; you are thieves and deceivers; you are covetous and neither generous nor kind; as for us, if we have a morsel of bread, we share it with our neighbor."[i]

Similarly, the people of the Wendat (or Huron) nation were particularly offended by the lack of generosity they observed among the French. A Friar named Gabriel Sagard said, "[The Wendat] reciprocate hospitality and give enough assistance to one another that the necessities of all people are provided for without there being an indigent beggar in any of their towns and villages; and they considered it an atrocity when they heard that there were a great many needy beggars in France, and thought this was for lack of charity in us, and blamed us for it severely."[ii]

In 1703, an indigenous leader named Kandiaronk offered the deepest criticisms saying, "I have spent six years reflecting on the state of European society and I can't think of a single way they act that's not inhuman, and I genuinely think this can only be the case if you stick to your distinctions of 'mine' and 'thine.' What you call money is the devil of devils, the tyrant of the French, the source of all evils, the bane of souls, and the slaughterhouse of the living.

To imagine that one can live in the country of money and preserve one's souls is like imaging one could preserve one's life at the bottom of a lake. Money is the father of luxury, lasciviousness, intrigues, trickery, lies, betrayal, insincerity—of all the world's worst behavior. Father's sell their children, husbands their wives, wives betray their husbands, brothers kill each other, friends are false, and all because of money. In the light of all this, tell me that we Wendat are not right in refusing to touch, or so much as look, at silver?"[iii]

Amazingly, Kandiaronk asked his European friends, "Do you seriously imagine I would be happy to live like one of the inhabitants of Paris, to take two hours every morning just to put on my shirt and make-up, to bow and scrape before every obnoxious galoot I meet on the street who happened to be born with inheritance? Do you really imagine I could carry a purse full of coins and not immediately hand them over to people who are hungry? If you abandoned the conceptions of mine and thine, such distinctions between [people] would dissolve; a levelling equality would take its place among you as it does among the Wendat…I have set forth the qualities we believe define humanity—wisdom, reason, equity, and demonstrated that the existence of separate material interests knocks all of these on the head."[iv] Time and again, the indigenous tried to show Europeans how they were living in a story of separation.

What captivated me is the similarity between what indigenous leaders said to Europeans and what Jesus said to the Pharisees. Immediately before he told the parable of the rich Man and Lazarus, Luke tells us "The Pharisees were lovers of money who heard Jesus speaking and scoffed at him. So, Jesus said to them, "You 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." Then he told this famous story, whose message is both terrifying and extremely clear: hoarding wealth while ignoring the poor has catastrophic consequences, in this life and the next, on earth as it is in heaven. It is not clear from this story if Jesus believed in a literal Hell, but it is obvious he was willing to use the Pharisees' belief in an afterlife against them.

The crazy thing is Lazarus didn't want the rich man's house, his purple clothes, his fancy linen underwear made from Egyptian cotton, or his daily feast. All Lazarus wanted were the scraps that fell from the rich man's table. Like the Canaanite woman, he knew even dogs got to eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table. But Lazarus was treated worse than a dog. He was not simply absent from the rich man's table; he was on the menu.

Lazarus was starving outside, while the rich man's dogs were making a meal of out him, licking his sores—a humiliating form of relief. Lazarus lived in an economy where even the wealthiest people could only afford to kill a fatted calf and feast occasionally, but the rich man in this story, feasted on daily occasion—yet he would not share, offer leftovers, or even throw scraps to poor Lazarus.

The world Lazarus found himself in was not unlike our own. A 2016 report from the Congressional Budget Office shows that while total family wealth has more than doubled over the last thirty years to $67 trillion in the U.S., most average families haven't seen a nickel of that gain. In fact, the typical American family actually lost wealth between 1989 and 2013, when we adjust for inflation. By contrast, people in the upper reaches of the American economy have done fantastic. Families in the top 10 percent have seen their wealth increase an average of 153%, and the top 1 percent have done the best of all, taking their overall share of the nation's wealth from 31% in 1989 to 42% today. The gap between the rich and poor is larger than ever. Inequality is vast and disparity is growing. The story of separation in America today feels as great as the chasm that separated the rich man from Lazarus in death.

Over the years as a pastor, I've had many different encounters with the poor. I've come to work to find people sleeping outside the church and had church leaders try to convince me to call the police to remove them. I've given away church benevolence funds to help people pay their bills, cover rent, fix cars, and buy food for their families. I've spent hours with social workers and non-profit directors discussing the best ways to help people in need. I've read countless books and research about economic disparity and the causes of poverty. Every experience I've had and every expert that I've talked to has taught me I should never give cash to the poor.

They say it's better to give to a shelter, or non-profit, or an organization providing services. They say the poor won't use the money well; they'll buy alcohol, cigarettes, or drugs. They say giving money to people on the street creates a dependency that hurts poor people. They say what the poor need is a job, not money. They say we should give to what makes the greatest impact and not for sentimental reasons. Some call it "toxic charity." Psychologist Robert Lupton said, "Never do for the poor what they can do for themselves" and "Giving to people who could be gaining from their own initiative may be the kindest way to destroy them."[v] So for years I stopped carrying cash, and even when I did have it, I wouldn't give it to the poor. And I felt justified in my decision. It was based on the advice of experts.

But then my daughter started asking why we weren't giving money to the people we saw on the corners. So, I started keeping cash with me again to give it to whoever we see. I'm not proud of myself. Honestly, I'm just being selfish. I'm too terrified by this parable not to give money away. I'm not going to be the Pharisee who drives by and ignores Lazarus just because I read Robert Lupton. It's not worth the risk!

There's a grammatical error in verse 20 that we often overlook, which changes the meaning of the story. The verb is not "lay" but "was laid," which means Lazarus did not lay down at the rich man's gate of his own accord. He was put there by someone else. The verb might mean that Lazarus' hunger and sickness made him unable to walk. Lazarus might have been disabled, which resulted in poverty. Either way, the fact that Lazarus "was laid" at the rich man's gate reflects a common practice of community care in the Middle East. Because he was the wealthiest person in town, people believed the rich man had the greatest responsibility to meet the needs of poor Lazarus. So, every day the members of the community would carry Lazarus to the gate of the rich man's estate in the hopes that he would be moved with compassion and generosity, but it never happened—not once. They were as proximate to each other as family, but the relational chasm that separated the rich man from Lazarus as wide as the East is from the West. He was living in the story of separation.

So were the Pharisees, and one might imagine they were calloused, heartless, moneygrubbing jerks. But history reveals a more complex picture. They did care about the poor, especially their ability to borrow money. Jewish laws of Sabbatical and Jubilee made creditors hesitant to lend money in the sixth year and forty-nineth year, because the next year debts had to be forgiven, and when the poor couldn't borrow money, they couldn't survive.

So, the most respected Pharisee of the day, Rabbi Hillel, a contemporary of Jesus, tried to bridge the gap between creditors and debtors with a special clause called the *prosbul,* a waiver the poor could sign to surrender their rights to forgiveness, giving the creditors a guarantee, their loans would be paid. So, it's difficult to argue the Pharisees didn't care about the poor, but the problem is Jesus taught the opposite of Rabbi Hillel. He did not attempt to bridge the gap between creditors and debtors, or rich and poor, with a fancy new kind of loan. He suggested radical generosity. To the creditors he said, "lend without expecting to be repaid," and to the debtors he said, "your debts have been forgiven."

One of the most striking aspects of Jesus' teachings is that he does not specify how to give to the poor, he just says over and again that we should. He also never told his followers, or the Pharisees, to give money for the sake of the poor. He provided only one reason we should give to the poor, and that is for our own benefit—not financially of course, but spiritually. We've been trained to see the Pharisees as legalistic and self-righteous, but Jesus saw them as lovers of money and the major dispute he had with them was over the question of what makes a person pure and holy. The Pharisees believed that purity was derived from observance of laws of table fellowship and keeping the Sabbath, but Jesus believed purity was derived from hospitality to strangers and giving to the poor. In fact, the Hebrew word for "justice" (*tzedek*) is the root of the word for "giving alms" (*tzedakah*).

Jesus believed there was something sacred and purifying about giving alms to the poor that saves us and makes us whole, by connecting us to them. The Hebrew word for holy means "to be set apart" so the Pharisees' believed holiness was equivalent to separateness, but Jesus completely overturned the definition of holiness—from an individual to a social and communal concept. For Jesus, to be set apart was not about separation, but solidarity. It was not to be set in relation; to be given the calling and responsibility of love.

It would be easy to say the problem with the Pharisees and the rich man was greed, loving money more than God and people, which it says in Timothy, is the root of all evil. It might even be tempting to say the problem with the Pharisees and the rich man was indifference, which Elie Wisel said is the opposite of love. But there's something more fundamental than greed or indifference at work in this parable.

In his book, *The Ascent of Humanity,* author Charles Eisenstein wrote, "[There is a] common root underneath all the diverse crises of the modern age. Underlying the vast swath of ruin our civilization has carved is not human nature, but the opposite: humanity denied. This denial of human nature rests in turn upon an illusion, a misconception of self and world. We have defined ourselves as other than we are, as discrete subjects separate from each other and separate from the world around us…Saints and mystics have tried for thousands of years to teach us how we are trapped in a delusion about who we are, [yet] we think of separation as a good thing, as freedom, independence, and as an ascent in which we have risen above our animal origins."[vi]

Whether it is separation from God, Creation, or other people, what Eisenstein shows is that the ideology of separation has generated the converging crises of our world today; it has made us what we are and threatens to destroy us. As for money, Eisenstein claims, "is the instrument, not the cause, but the *instrument*—by which our separation from nature, spirit, love, beauty, justice, peace, and community approaches its maximum. [When we are] immersed in the logic of money, we actually see separation as a good thing." But separation is an illusion. It is a lie. The reality is we are not separate from God, Creation, or other people. We are deeply connected with everyone and everything. If the pandemic taught us anything it's that what happens to one affects another.

As Dr. King said, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." We are not whole or integrated human beings without each other, without Creation, or without God. Eisenstein suggests the only solution to the lie of separation is the deep medicine of interbeing, the ability to embody the full reality that we are not independent of one another, or Creation, or God, but completely and totally interdependent; cosmically and biologically bound up together; not separate but symbiotic. And this is what we celebrate every time we come to the table for communion. We remember our inescapable connectedness to each other, God, and Creation, and we receive the deep medicine of interbeing.

Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus was an attempt to shock the Pharisees, and all of us, out of the lie of separation—to not only to see the poor and be filled with generosity, but to understand the fundamental ways we are connected to each other; rich and poor and everyone in-between. One study, has uncovered a powerful exception to that pattern. For poor children, research found, living in an area where people have more friendships that cut across class lines significantly increased how much they earn in adulthood."[vii] Furthermore, "The study found that if poor children grew up in neighborhoods where 70 percent of their friends were wealthy it increased their future incomes by 20 percent. These cross-class friendships had a stronger impact than school quality, family structure, job availability or a community's racial composition. [Call it social capital if you want], but the people you know, open massive economic opportunities."[viii]

The separation at the beginning and end of Jesus' parable is a lie, as Pablo Picasso said, "Art is the lie that enables us to realize the truth." The truth is we are all connected, which is why we don't carry cash for the sake of poor Lazarus. We carry it for ourselves. We carry it for the sake of our souls and our salvation. We carry it because our hearts need it. We carry it so whenever the opportunity presents itself, we can give something to remember we're not separate. We are connected to everyone, everywhere. What happens to you happens to me. We are all one family. We are forever linked. We are a communion. We are not separate. Separation is an illusion. Separation is a lie. Symbiosis is the truth and solidarity is the goal. Holiness is not separation but relation.

Welcoming strangers, sharing food, and giving to the poor—these are the rituals that purify our hearts, make us holy, and build beloved community. So, with everything we have, we must remember our unbreakable unity each other and with the poor, and we must refuse to forget that truth or exist in any other way. We must reject the story of separation and write a new story—a story where all people have the power to live together united in equality and peace. Perhaps we need a story that begins something like this, "On the night he was arrested and betrayed, Jesus said, 'Take and eat this bread, in remembrance of me.'"

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[i] David Graeber & David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, New York: 2021, 38.
[ii] Ibid., 39.
[iii] Ibid., 54-55.
[iv] Ibid., 56.
[v] Robert Lupton, *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help*, Harper One: New York, 2012.
[vi] Charles Eisenstein, *The Ascent of Humanity: Civilization and the Human Sense of Self*, North Atlantic Books: Berkley, 2007.
[vii] Claire Cain Miller, Josh Katz, Francesca Paris, and Aatish Bhatia, "Vast New Study Shows a Key to Reducing Poverty: More Friendships Between Rich and Poor," New York Times, Aug. 1, 2022.
[viii] Ibid.