

Lazarus and the Rich Man  
R.C.I.A. - Luke 16:19-31  
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What a powerful Gospel this is! But what did you hear? What went through your mind? Did it raise our conscientiousness? Did we personalize the story? Did we recognize this situation in our own lives? This IS our story today. We tend to live the same way. That which seems rejected by society may be closer to heaven than we are. What a surprise we may have waiting for us as God's judgment turns the tables on how we may perceive ourselves. Do we see ourselves as the rich man, or as Lazarus! Or in the middle. Scripture tells us very little about the rich man or about Lazarus; only the final outcome of the relationship. Therefore we can speculate.

Did the rich man consider himself that rich? Or just that comfortable. How many time did the rich man STEP OVER Lazarus as he came and went. Lazarus seemed to be an embarrassment to him; as his friends and relatives came and went. How did he justify himself to this embarrassment? If I give him something will he go away? He probably thought of himself as a good person. If the head of the synagogue asked for a donation; he would be generous...see how good I am. There are some among us today who would do anything for JESUS; but tend to forget that Jesus is to be found in the poor, the helpless, the down-trodden, the migrant, the stranger, and even in our enemy. Even those who we tend to step over or bypass in our daily lives, justifying ourselves that they would probably be wasteful of that which we don't give. How many times did the rich man reason with himself that Lazarus would only waste his generosity. We do as much, almost every day on our street corners, make judgments about the homeless and the hungry.

To be poor and in poverty is not a sin; it becomes an opportunity for us to be generous and compassionate. Do we step over our opportunities just as the rich man stepped over Lazarus every morning? Dogs had more pity on Lazarus than the rich man.

The Gospel tells us of two existences; the one here on earth which is the period of trial [the trial of brotherly love and compassion ]; the other existence in heaven as reward for the love of neighbor. How the rich man begged for what he was now denied. NOT EVEN A CUP OF WATER. This alone must cause us to stop and think!!! Let us not fall into the rich man's trap. We are only the custodians of God's generosity; not the owners. Generosity and love of neighbor is how WE are made in God's image.

Too often we limit ourselves to the corporal works of mercy: feed the hungry, cloth the naked, give shelter to the homeless, care for the sick and lonely, rescue those who are captive to all forms of addiction. These are but the sores on humanity, that even the dogs lick. These are all worthy causes.

BUT of equal importance are the spiritual works of mercy which look beyond the material to encompass the spirit and the soul of man. To instruct the ignorant, to reassure the doubtful, to speak out against sinfulness, to extend patients and be forgiving. These are the common concerns of Christianity that lead to an extraordinary compassionate life for all.

The rich man wanted to be happy in this life, which led to selfishness and his destruction. What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world but suffers the loss of his soul? Through compassion he could have saved his soul.

A few years ago I actually met my Lazarus. I came to know him and to eventually love him and respect him, even with all his misery and unpleasantness. I eventually came to learn much from him for which I am very grateful. His name wasn't Lazarus, it was Odelva.

I spent 8 years working as a health professional in the N.Y.S. dept. of developmental disabilities. I was assigned to a cottage of severely disabled clients. It was the only locked cottage on campus because of the nature of their behavior. They were listed as having

IQs of 30 or less. Odelva was listed as an I.Q. of 0. She was approximately 35 years of age and had been institutionalized since age 5 because of severe seizures. The seizures led to a slurred, unintelligible babbling. She was physically incapacitated, unable to walk. To move she slid to the floor and then rolled to where she wanted to go.

She was fiercely independent when it was meal time. She wouldn't let anyone help her. The food ended up in her hair, in her nose or ear, or in her lap. Some eventually entered her mouth. When someone tried to help her, she would rock back and forth in her wheel chair eventually destroying it.

Because of her inability to socialize, she withdrew into herself and became an angry, aggressive, deliberate, destructive, assaultive, uncooperative, self-abusive person. She would bite, scratch, hit, and kick anyone near her. I have scars to prove it. She was a prisoner locked into the solitary confinement cell of her body. She was absolutely impossible.

Representatives of the State would always make a visit to see this animal that was caged on the ward and comment on the need for laws to euthanize such persons who had no value and were just expenses to the state.

After working with her for 5 years I gradually began to understand her slurred speech. She had a history of sleeping under her bed. Staff would constantly fight with her to sleep in the bed. One day I asked her why she slept under the bed. She looked surprised and said, "So the devil can't find me." I was stunned that she had such a profound, yet simple concept of life. I checked her file and found she was baptized Catholic. I contacted the Chaplain assigned to the institution to include her in his next confirmation date which he did. On the confirmation day the Bishop was late. Odelva became impatient and became highly disruptive in the Chapel. I had to remove her back to the cottage. When confirmation was over I

asked the Bishop to come to the cottage and confirm her, which he did.

Several days later I had night duty for a week. As I made rounds I saw her sleeping in her bed. I complimented the staff for getting Odelva into her bed. They responded that they didn't do anything, she just got in bed every night for the past few weeks. When I returned to day duty I asked her how come she was sleeping in her bed. She gave me a quizzical look as if to say -- Don't you know? She replied, "The devil can't get me now!" What a simple statement of faith that was. Is that what a person of "0" IQ can understand about the power of the Holy Spirit?

A few months after this instance she died in her sleep. At her funeral there were over nine hundred people filling the chapel. Seeing the large crowd, the Chaplain said to me, "You're preaching because you knew her best." What could I say about her? No one realized how many people her life had touched. How she made impressions on each of their lives. That was her legacy, how she made all of us more compassionate by her condition of life. She forced us to learn the deeper meaning of patience. We got to know ourselves better, to appreciate how frustrating some people can become. She made all of us better people for having known her.

The lesson is how God uses some people to influence the lives of others. God gave Odelva virtually nothing of this life's amenities; yet in her nothingness she was a positive influence to the lives of hundreds of people.

There is no marker of her passing through this life; no grave; no tombstone; even her memory is lost. Only God knows this Lazarus. A few years ago my RCIA class memorialized her by having a star in the sky named after her.

In the back of my mind I have harbored this secret, that the day I die I will be able to meet her as God fully created her to be. For now, she remains in my mind as one of God's true heroes. A true

Lazarus. A person who bore her sufferings in a very simple faith;  
"The devil can't get me now."