

*19“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. 20And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, 21who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. 22The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. 23In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. 24He called out, ‘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.’ 25But Abraham said, ‘Child, 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. 26Besides 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.’ 27He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house— 28for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ 29Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ 30He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ 31He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”*

I called Cynthia the other night. I really didn't want to but I felt I had to. Her Son Brian had died when the pickup truck he was driving went out of control on a gravel road and rolled over. He was sixteen, he'd been drinking, he was late for curfew.

Five years ago I made the same phone call to Cynthia, her son Greg had been drinking, rolled the car and died.

I really did not want to call Cynthia.

As we talked, she asked, how are your children? Fine, I said, and changed the subject. My joy over my children, that they are alive, that they are healthy, that we are together, I could not speak of this to her. I almost felt guilty about the blessings God has given.

I think of Tom, he'd been the mayor of our community in North Dakota, he was dying of cancer, facing bankruptcy. I remember how he told me what if felt like that no one came to see him anymore. Friends of a lifetime had disappeared. “Why?” he asked.

Maybe being with Tom made them feel guilty. Health, enough money to pay the bills, these blessings made it seem that Tom was different from them and they from him. It was easier to stay away.

Many of us here have prospered. Many of us enjoy material blessings from God, blessings of health, blessings of family. Every day, every hour our hearts might well be overflowing with thanks. Yet here among us are also those who are at this moment dying.

Here among us are those who search for a job. Here among us are those who will forever grieve the loss of a child, a spouse, a brother or a sister, here among us are some who longed to have children but never did or could. Can the haves celebrate with the have nots? Can widows join in the festivities for golden anniversary of their friends, bereaved mothers rejoice in the life and health of their neighbor's children, the unemployed rejoice in the fine new home of the wealthy?

Can the wealthy one meet the poor one on level ground as an equal? Can the mother of many sit with the one who has lost her child, can the strong, the healthy be sisters and brothers to the dying?

In the parable Jesus told that I read as the gospel, the rich man and the poor man remain separated. In life the poor man hungers at the gate of the rich man, but is never received as a brother.

In death, they remain separated - the poor man in the presence of Abraham, the rich man in Hades.

What did God expect of that rich man in his life? Alms for the poor?

Did God want him to give away all of his money for the poor?

Or better yet what does God want of you and me when we hear the story of the rich man and Lazarus? That we would be afraid of hell and give to the hungry? That we would feel guilty over our wealth and give to a hunger appeal?

I cannot believe that Jesus told this parable to get us to act out of fear, or out of guilt. For the issue is not whether the poor man will have some bread to eat. If God wants him fed, God could feed him.

But what God wants in us is that we would find in everyone we encounter a sister, a brother.

For if the man lying at my gate is truly my brother, with a name, and a history that I learn from listening to him he will never starve at my gate. How much I'll give - what I'll do I cannot say, but I know that my brother will never starve at my gate.

Jesus did not leave us a detailed list of instructions for living. But he has made us his brothers and sisters through his dying and rising.

He did not say you must give ten or twenty or thirty percent to the poor, but he has made us members of his own body. Therefore as Paul writes, "If one member suffers, all suffer together, if one member is honored, all rejoice together."

We are joined together in one Lord - the blessed and the bereaved, single and married and divorced, poor and rich, female and male, young and old. We are one because we have one Lord. We are eternally sisters and brothers in him.

Nothing else will finally matter.

For our economic status will pass away, and the bereaved will be filled with laughter, the hungry will be filled with good things. We will be one family.

Christ has called us together here to begin already the caring and the love and the compassion that will be ours for each other for all eternity.