

*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.’”*

Would we have believed it if someone had told us it was going to happen? Could we have believed that such a plot could be hatched – security evaded – pilots overpowered – planes flown into those towers – the towers collapsing? Or even a plane getting anywhere near the pentagon crashing into it – doing the damage? And if someone had predicted such a moment would we have changed our behavior in any way? Or would we have all gone on with things in exactly the same way?

Jesus tells us a shocking story today of an ending for the life of a man that is truly shocking. The story begins with a rich man feasting every day – a poor man longing to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table. Now that much sounds kind of normal.

I remember when the congregation I served in North Dakota sponsored two refugees from Poland - Peter and Stanley. Of all the things they saw and heard in America the greatest surprise was the local grocery store. Coming from a land where shortages were the norm – where lines for whatever food there was were long – they were astounded at the abundance of food available all the time. Now if Peter and Stanley were impressed by the grocery store of a small town in North Dakota can you imagine who someone from sub Saharan Africa or from Afghanistan would react? They long to be fed with the crumbs.

But back to the story: Now the way this story should go is that one day the rich man realized how much that poor man Lazarus was suffering. And he went out the front door and opened the gate at the end of the walk and offered Lazarus some food. Or better yet invited him in and washed his sores and promised him a seat at his table three times daily. And Jesus could have said to all the hearers – “Now go and do likewise.”

But like the story of the twin towers in New York this story simply does not have the right ending. Someone in security should have discovered the hijackers at the last minute or a pilot should have successfully resisted. But every time the story of the towers is told it will end with the mighty monuments to human ingenuity, skill and wealth crumbling to dust. And so it is with every telling of Jesus’ story.

Lazarus, the poor man dies and goes to be with Abraham. The rich man who remains nameless in this story dies also and is in torment in Hades.

But there is still time for a happy ending – maybe the rich man can show he is sorry and be forgiven and join Lazarus at Abraham’s side. But he does not even ask for that.

*“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.”*

Just a drop of water – just a little help – like the poor man hoping only for some crumbs. But no.

*“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.”*

Just like that everything had changed. The rich one became the poor one – the poor one, rich.

In years to come there will be many tellings of the story of the World Trade Center and each telling will be for a purpose. The president will tell the story to mobilize a nation’s response. The attorney general will tell the story seeking changes in wiretap and privacy laws. Militant terrorists will tell the story to inspire those who plan the next slaughter; historians will retrace the events before and after to seek an understanding of what has been. Always, in every telling there will be a purpose.

And Jesus' story? Does our Lord have a purpose in telling his parable to you this day? If so, what might that purpose be?

Maybe Jesus wants you to realize you will not always be on the short end of things. Today you struggle and go without but one day you will be satisfied.

Maybe Jesus wants you to realize you will not always be the one who has abundant feasts. One day the little ones you walk by and give no thought to will be in the honored place and you will be a nameless suffering one.

I am sure of this – Jesus did not tell this story for nothing – for no reason.

My guess is that Jesus tells this story and all his stories to wake you and I up the way falling towers has awakened us to a place called Afghanistan and the hatred of some of the people there for America. All those poor people who have no name in my mind have a name with God. God will not forget them. Nor will God forget those who never open the gate to touch a neighbor in need.

Things don't always work out best. This very day some poor children in this land and other lands are hungry. Thank God that Jesus promises God will not forget them forever.

Will I? Will you? Will we be changed by Jesus story? O will we think – that could never happen to us? Things like that never do happen to people like us. Do they?