

Hospitality and Your Neighbor

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

October 27, 2019-AM Service

Rev. Peter Jonker

Luke 16:19-31

Today's sermon is called, 'Hospitality and your Neighbor' and in it we will focus on Jesus' call to love our neighbor. The parable we usually associate with that call is not the parable I just read. Usually we think of the parable of the Good Samaritan. We all love that parable. It's one of Jesus' best known stories. But there is a danger in the parable of the Good Samaritan. If we are not careful, we can fall into the Good Samaritan trap. What is the Good Samaritan trap? What happens when you fall into the Good Samaritan trap?

Well, a brief reminder of the parable. Jesus has just called people to love their neighbors as themselves, when he gets a question from a teacher of the law, a lawyer, who asks, "Who exactly is my neighbor?" The man wants to legally define neighbor so that he can limit his liabilities. He's hoping to keep the circle of his neighbors small. He's hoping he will only have to love and care for friends and family. Instead, Jesus tells the story of a Samaritan, a person who's about as far from a friend to the lawyer as you can get. And yet, this Samaritan gives extravagant care, under dangerous circumstances to a complete stranger. So the parable answers the lawyer's question in the widest possible sense: Your neighbor is everybody! You are called to love all of the people, and you are called to love them deeply and sacrificially!! Ministers, myself included, love to preach on this text and when we do, we push home the wide embrace of Jesus' message. Everyone is our neighbor! We're called to love all people regardless of color or creed.

So far so good. But here is where the trap comes. And let me be clear, I'm not criticizing Jesus. Jesus didn't make the trap; the trap comes from our human tendency to twist his words for our convenience. Here's the potential trap: Sometimes when we are called to love everyone in general, we end up loving no one in particular. Sometimes, when everyone is our neighbor, no one is. It's a little like one of those elementary school field days where everyone gets a ribbon that says 'winner.' Kids know that doesn't work. If everyone is a winner, then no one is. So, sometimes when everyone is our neighbor, no one is. We hear the message about loving humanity and our heart swells with love for all the people out there! Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world! We get a lump in our throat as we think of humankind, but we never really get down to loving the person right in front of us. That's the Good Samaritan trap.

Which brings us to today's passage. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus is a great companion piece to the parable of the Good Samaritan. There's a reason Jesus told them both. He knows that we need both.

What's the rich man's sin in this parable? Is the Rich man hostile to Lazarus? Is he mean to beggars? Does he actively refuse to help Lazarus? No. Not that we can tell. In the context of this passage, the rich man's sin is not that he had contempt for Lazarus and people like him. In the context of this passage, the rich man's failing is that he just never saw Lazarus. Of course, he probably saw him in the optical sense. The visual data of Lazarus' presence was recorded on his retina and the information was sent to his brain through his nervous system. It's just that

Lazarus' presence never registered as part of his moral concern. He's heard the law and the prophets read in the synagogue since he was a little boy, but it never occurred to him that the law and the prophets were talking about this person lying at his gate. When Deuteronomy 15 said, *"If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites...do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. Be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need,"* he thought of the poor in general, he didn't think of Lazarus. When Isaiah 58 thundered, *"Is this not the kind of fasting I have chosen: to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter,"* he thought of poor wanderers in general, not the specific homeless beggar at his gate. I imagine the rich man sent checks to the charities of his choice, and on stewardship Sunday, he let his coins rattle into the temple coffers and he figured that dispatched his obligations to "the poor."

Are you starting to see how the two parables need each other? How they complement one another? The Good Samaritan pushes the scope of our love wide. All people are your neighbors! The Good Samaritan shows us love's big picture. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus tightens the focus. It calls you to direct your love to the specific neighbor, the specific stranger, the specific wanderer whom God has laid at your gate. The person whom God puts in front of you right now.

The one whom God puts in front of you. That's really important language! Please notice the verb tense in verse 20. Verse 20 says that Lazarus "was laid" at the rich man's gate. It's a passive verb. Lazarus was laid at the rich man's gate. The verb tense suggests that this wasn't an accident; someone put him there. Who do you think that someone was? Who pushed that beggar into the rich man's life? I think the answer is pretty clear. God laid this beggar at the rich man's gate. God put this neighbor in his path. So your neighbor, my neighbor is not just all humankind; your neighbor is the specific person whom God has put in front of you right now.

Jay and Dave, the authors of the *Art of Neighboring*, are really good at making sure we see and love the specific person, the specific neighbor, whom God puts in front of us. They have a simple and interesting drill they use to help us do that. They ask you to make a three by three grid with 9 blank squares in it, like a Tic Tac Toe grid. In the middle square of the grid you put your name. That's your house. The middle square is your house or apartment or condo or wherever you live. The other squares are your neighbors, the houses beside you, the three people who live immediately in back of you, and the three people across the road. (I'm imagining you live in a home on a street, but you could modify for apartments or condos or any living arrangement). Now go through those other squares. Do you know the names of the people who live beside you? What about the names of the people across the road? What about the people behind you? Do you know all the names? Jay and Dave say that in their experience, only 10 percent of people can fill out all the first names in their grid.

Now, if you were able to fill out the first name of a neighbor, can you fill out their last name? And now, how many meaningful life details can you add? Do you know where your neighbor works? Do you know anything about their families? Finally, can you write anything about their spiritual emotional state? Do you know what faith they practice? Do you know any of their hopes or any of their hurts?

I did this for my neighborhood and I admit that for three of the nine boxes on my grid would be completely blank. I don't know anything about these neighbors whom God has laid at my gate. This is not good. It's not good because good communities, strong communities begin

with good neighbors. But more to the point, it's not good because of what Jesus says in this parable. It's not good because these are the people God has laid at my gate, the ones I'm called to love.

Jay and Dave suggest this exercise for your home neighborhood, but it strikes me you could apply it other places. You could apply it to the neighborhood we are sitting right now. Most of you are here pretty much every week, and most of you sit in the same place every week. Bless you, you are Christian Reformed. Well, what if we regulars made a mental map of the people sitting around us. You probably know the faces of the regulars around you. Do you know their names? Do you know anything about them? You may not have a beggar covered in sores at the end of your driveway, but you might have an exhausted caregiver at the end of your pew who would love to be seen. Maybe not every Sunday, but once in a while she'd love it if someone would say her name and ask her how she's doing. This congregation is your neighborhood. These are the people that God has laid at your gate.

Then we could think of the neighborhood around our church. God has placed us here in the city, under the cross. Who are the people God has laid at our gate? I get here pretty early on the mornings when I preach. 7 am-ish. Last week when I arrived there were a lot of people laid at our gate. There were probably 5 on the porch on the Sheldon side of the SDA, and there were five more sitting in front of the newer part of the SDA building. And when I walked out the door on the LaGrave avenues side there was a woman sleeping there. She had her cart with her. A blanket was spread out. There were scraps of food all around, empty chip bags, and smushed Styrofoam cups. All her earthly possessions fit on the landing in front of our door. She didn't have any sores like Lazarus, but I did notice that she had a black eye. What do you think I said to her? I said good morning and told her that a service was starting soon and she should probably move along. I never asked her name. And then I spent this week reading this parable and feeling uncomfortable.

It's hard though. How do you love these neighbors? A week ago Bob Grussing and I spent 10 minutes going back and forth with a guy who wanted 50 bucks for a bus ticket because he said he needed to get to Kalamazoo for a funeral. We don't do bus tickets, and when the guy wouldn't tell us the funeral name so we could confirm it, we sent him packing. This sort of thing happens a lot at LaGrave. I know we were right not to give him money, but is this going to be the whole story of how I deal with my neighbors? I don't know what the answer is, and there is no way we can fix every single person God has laid at our gate, but I have a strong feeling that there's a better way.

The weight of this parable is compounded by one more detail. Let me ask you a couple of questions. What's the name of the beggar in this parable? Lazarus. What's the name of the rich man? He has no name. That's no accident. It's a holy inversion. In our society, everyone would know the name of the rich man and no one would know the name of the beggar. This parable suggests that in the Kingdom of heaven, the values are not what we're used to.

I know that this sermon runs the risk of laying burdens on people. You come here as tired people.

Stuff is happening in your family and stuff is happening at your job and stuff is happening in your heart. For some of you, just getting here was a heroic effort. Now I'm saying, here are three places where we are called to be better neighbors! "Peter, I don't need that right now I

need to worship and be fed. I don't know what I have to give to anyone else right now." If that's you, let me say just two things to you today.

First: The Lord loves you and He sees you trying. This call that I'm putting before you here is not meant to be a burden. In the long run, living in communities where everyone is loved and no one lies at the gates unnoticed won't be a burden it will be a relief, it will be a blessing it will be a little bit of shalom. It won't just be work; it will be food. If we can start in just one place this week. One bit of kindness to a neighbor, to a church member, to a person in this neighborhood. Just one thing in one of these areas, you will have opened your parched heart to the water of God's love.

Second: remember the Jesus who calls you to care for the neighbor at your gate is also the one who came for us beggars. He did not stay in His mansion clad in fine purple and linen, He came down out of His throne room to deal with our mess. We're covered in sores too—not Lazarus' kind of sores, but others just as debilitating. Wounds of our sin, wounds of our loss, half of what's wrong with us is our own fault, the other half feels like a load of junk dumped on us for no reason that we can see, and all of it together leaves us exhausted and hungry for home. And Jesus came to us. He took off his royal robes, He put on a servant's cloak and a crown of thorns and he came to us. He has lifted us up, and He is carrying us towards his Father's house. He's carrying us up through the gate towards the Master's table. And when we arrive, we will get much more than the crumbs that fall from the that table, we will get a feast.

© Rev. Peter Jonker