

**"Have Mercy"
A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – September 25, 2022**

**Please Read:
1 Timothy 6:6-19
Luke 16:19-31**

In the book titled, *The Sum of Us*, Heather McGhee writes about the racial and economic divides in our country. McGhee starts off with the fascinating, if not embarrassing historical fact that for most of our history, the United States has had the largest economy in the world and enough money to feed and educate, build world-leading infrastructure, and generally ensure a high standard-of-living for everyone, *but we don't*. We're actually near the bottom of the list of per-capita spending of industrialized nations and you don't need me to tell you that the divide between rich and poor and racial tensions have increased dramatically in recent years.

As an illustration, McGhee recalls the troubling history of public swimming pools. Public pools are uniquely American. Like free public grade schools, public pools were part of an "Americanizing" mid-20th century project intended to overcome ethnic divisions and form a common identity – and it worked... Until racial desegregation hit. "Public" had been interpreted in many parts of the country as "*white public*." An extreme case was the Montgomery, Alabama Oak Park pool, one of the grandest pools for miles. Of course, it was for whites only, and when the courts ruled the segregated pool illegal, the city council decided to drain the pool. Not only that, they filled it in with dirt and it hasn't existed since. In other words, the whites in that area of the country at that time would rather not have a pool in the heat of summer if it meant sharing it with people of color.

In fact, the city of Montgomery closed the entire park system (pools, community centers, parks and even the zoo). For over a decade, they closed all public parks and recreation facilities. They never did reopen the pool. This practice was replicated across the country. Racial hatred led to the closure of the largest public pool in the world at the time in St. Louis (with a capacity of 10,000 swimmers)!¹

That's incredible to me but gets at what Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus addresses. At first glance, this parable seems to be simply a prophetic attack on the chasm between rich and the poor. But the heart of Jesus' attack is not the *disparity* of wealth as much as the *disdain* with which the rich man treated Lazarus. Jesus attacks the attitude that too often becomes a part of our life together even in the church, whether it's about wealth, power or privilege, there is a cost for indifference and insensitivity to others.

Too often our lives are lived in such a way that we try to avoid seeing those who are in need. In a town as wealthy as New Canaan, it is rare to find the raw poverty which afflicted Lazarus. Our vision is limited by our geographic distance from the needy. Occasional mission offerings ease our "out of sight, out of mind" conscience!

But please note that in the parable, the rich man could not miss Lazarus. Lazarus was just outside the gate of the rich man's house. Jesus describes his plight in vivid detail: He was "covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table;

¹ Heather McGhee, *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We can Prosper Together* (New York: One World, 2021), 17-28.

even the dogs would come and lick his sores." The rich man saw Lazarus every day; he even knew his name...

I have yet to find anyone covered with sores outside the Manse on Jonathan Road, or anywhere near this sanctuary. It would be tempting to dismiss the relevance of this parable in my life. How easy it would be to go off into some delicious diatribe against all "rich" people out there who aren't giving enough to charity... But Jesus speaks here to you and me, regardless of our economic status. People with any kind of wealth, power and privilege are to show compassion to any who are hurting, broken and needy just outside the gates of our lives, and you probably know their names.

And sometimes it's just a matter of when you ask the question who is hurting here. Many of you do know what it is like to be poor. After struggling in relationships which are now broken, after years of careers or employment which was challenging yet meaningless, after having faced devastating financial hardships, after painful losses of loved ones, or after your best hopes and dreams have been dashed, you know what it's like to be poor, to be metaphorically covered with sores, outside the gate of the larger community begging for someone to understand or care for you....

In interpreting this parable, could it be that we are both the rich man and Lazarus at the same time? We have maintained traditions of separation and indifference that make up so much of our world, yet we can also identify with the poor helpless beggar outside the gate. The summer before I graduated from seminary, I was invited to serve as the summer intern at the Union Church in Mexico City. I was picked up by the Senior Pastor from the airport and driven to the home where I was going to stay, but when we arrived, I thought we were at the church, it was such a massive complex with domes and behind a huge wall. There were pools and stables and the living room seemed as big as this sanctuary. You know you have what some call the Mayor of Mexico house here on Oenoke Ridge, well where I was staying was actually the former Mexico City's Chief of Police's old house. It was rented for John Goyert, the CEO of Olgive and Mather in Mexico. As John and his family were staying up in Martha's Vineyard for the summer, they allowed me to stay in their home. The maids didn't know what to make of me, as I always made my bed and tried to clean my dishes. It was on a hill in an area called Las Lomas, and I'll never forget one night standing up on a rampart on one of the walls to watch the sunset. My gaze fell to see some workers outside a construction site on the street below, and they were having fun laughing and joking together at the end of the day. I remember feeling so lonely and realizing that I wanted to be with them, but there were so many walls that kept us apart... I learned that summer and in the six years I later lived and worked in Mexico that wealth, power, and privilege come with tremendous responsibility.

I believe that God's judgment comes as an unavoidable result of maintaining the walls and the indifference which comes between people in any way shape or form. And God's judgment is not what worldly wisdom might predict. The rich man, who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day, finds himself begging for mercy in the fiery depths of Hell. Ironically, he still looks at Lazarus as his inferior, one who should serve him. He still can't see Lazarus as a person distinct from his own self-centered world of insatiable needs.

Lazarus, on the other hand, the one who was neglected and forgotten outside the gate, is judged to be worthy in God's eyes of the comforts of all the angels of heaven. With the great leader of the faith, Father Abraham himself, he enjoys eternal blessing... Ironically the

separation which the rich man maintained is in the end permanent, so that even Lazarus cannot come to help him in Hades; nor help his unrighteousness brothers.

We must choose how we will posture ourselves toward the Lazaruses in our lives. We can step over them or help them take their next step. We can give them the back of our hand, or we can hand them back their lives. In Christ, we can share their pain, problems, and perplexities, or we can maintain our indifference. But beware: The walls which we maintain between us and anyone in need around us may be permanently fixed if we do not find a way to overcome them.

What's interesting to me, and most hopeful about McGhee's book, *The Sum of Us*, is that she argues when we exclude and divide, wall off ourselves from one another, it really hurts us all. That's the bad news. The good news is, that when we open ourselves up to one another and break down walls of division and build bridges to those who are different than ourselves, it results in a mutual blessing. She documents places around the country where diversity, equity and inclusion is being celebrated and embraced, and how that brings new energy and ideas to the community. When wealth, power and privilege are shared, it's a blessing for all. It's the way it's supposed to be. Seeing one another across economic, ethnic, racial, gender and political divisions is the way forward to working together and building thriving communities.

Take time this week to consider the walls of separation that you may be maintaining in your life - in the relationships between you and people in your family, or in your office, or even within the church? If our worship is not to be a mockery of Christ's calling to be one Body, then I believe we must acknowledge and repent of our indifference and insensitivity to those who are different from us.

One last thought. One of my favorite prayers is simply, "Lord, have mercy on me a sinner." It's not a prayer to wallow in guilt, but to set me free to be more open to the realities all around me, to see the people around me who all (everyone!) bear the image of God and each of whom are worthy of my love and respect. We are called to build a more inclusive community, where the Lazaruses are seen and cared for, not ignored or marginalized. Jesus invites us to recognize that we are all one... "there but for the grace of God go I," and that we are called to be leaders in New Canaan who not only receive but have mercy for others... seeing and caring for the needs of others.

Friends, I invite you to look and see the people around you. Remember that Christ died and rose again for you and each person here. Remember that only as we admit our common poverty and dependence upon the Lord and acknowledge his call to love those outside the gate, then and only then may we truly celebrate and experience community. Then, as we continue to live in Him who has shown mercy for us all, even we may find, as Lazarus' name indicates, "God Helps"...

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.