

Sermon Luke 16:19-31

‘At Our Doorstep’

16th Sunday after Pentecost

September 28th, 2025

A week ago Friday, I was part of a group that sang Christmas carols at a fundraising event in Queens. Why Christmas Carols in September? Well, the organizers of that fundraiser were able to invite Gerald Charles Dickens – the great-great-grandson of THE Charles Dickens; Gerald Dickens happens to be an actor. 32 years ago, before the 150th anniversary of the publishing of ‘A Christmas Carol’, he was asked if he would do a dramatic reading of his ancestor’s work. Over the years, he developed it into a one man show, as he is acting out the entire ‘A Christmas Carol’, narrative and all. That’s what he did a little over a week in Queens. Our caroling group, all decked out in Victorian garb, was the opening act for this amazing one man show. After the show, Mr. Dickens sat down at our table. It was great talking with him about this and that, including which movie version of ‘A Christmas Carol’ he likes most. I was pleased to hear that ‘A Muppet Christmas Carol’ is one of his favorites – I personally just adore it!

Now is there anyone here who is not familiar with the story of ‘A Christmas Carol’ and its main characters – Ebenezer Scrooge, Bob Cratchit, and Tiny Tim?

Another question: has anyone here actually read ‘A Christmas Carol’? I admit I haven’t. And so it was fascinating to hear the entire work, word for word (even the parts I thought to be somewhat redundant for the story ark). Some parts I heard for the very first time, because most of the narrative doesn’t make it into the movies. I personally was struck by the description of how Scrooge returns to his dwellings on Christmas Eve, which are dark and cold, and how Scrooge actually enjoys the darkness, ‘for darkness is cheap.’ Darkness is cheap – that sentence really struck me.

Anyway, Scrooge is used to the darkness, he’s comfortable with it, and it is hard for him to experience light – hope, lightheartedness, joy. And he sees those in need, right at his doorstep in Victorian London, as a nuisance. Why help? Aren’t there poor houses and prisons for people like that? Doesn’t he pay taxes for that? Scrooge also thinks that it’s beneficial if such people die – to reduce the overpopulation. Boo, Scrooge!

Charles Dickens, of course, wrote ‘A Christmas Carol’ as a social commentary. He himself had spent some time as a child in a workhouse he was sent to - to help pay off his father’s debts. He knew what it was like to be exploited by a system that favors the rich, and to be seen as disposable, and a nuisance. He experienced how the industrial revolution created a society in which the rich were getting richer, and the poor were getting poorer and often living under dismal circumstances. And so he advocated for compassion, and charity, reminding his fellow Christians that it their duty to love and help their neighbor. And he succeeded. Dickens became the forerunner of various social justice movements in the 19th century, mostly initiated by faith organizations.

I sometimes wonder if Dickens modeled Scrooge after the rich man we hear about in today’s gospel story. They have some things in common: the disregard for the poor, and the means to help those in need. The rich man Jesus talks about couldn’t care less about poor Lazarus lying at his doorstep, just like Scrooge couldn’t care less about the poverty in 19th century London. But then there are also some significant differences: whereas Scrooge leads a frugal lifestyle and doesn’t seem to be able to enjoy what life has to offer, the rich man sounds like a bon vivant: he feasts sumptuously every day, and clothes himself in the latest fashions.

But there is another parallel which we might miss: Scrooge is visited, first by his former business partner, Jacob Marley, and then the three ghosts or spirits of Christmas past, present, and future, warning him that he might end up tormented for all eternity if he doesn’t come around. The rich man in today’s gospel story doesn’t seem to have that benefit and ends up in hell – but if you paid close attention to the story, you will have noticed that Abraham reminds the rich man that God sent – well, maybe not spirits, but Moses and the prophets to admonish people to do the right thing and take care of the needy. It’s right there, in the Scriptures! You can’t claim you didn’t know!

And so today’s gospel story and Dicken’s ‘A Christmas Carol’ show us the possibilities: you either listen and learn and have a chance of being redeemed – or you end up in eternal torment. You have a choice. At least that what it sounds like as we listen to today’s gospel story (of course we believe in God’s grace, but let’s not get into that right now, for argument’s sake...).

Now it’s easy to be judgmental as we look at the likes of the rich man of today’s gospel story, or Scrooge. It’s easy to be judgmental about all those multi-billionaires today who amass more and more wealth and who share very little, if

anything at all, even though they could single-handedly solve many issues in this world today. Compassion? Empathy? Bah, humbug!

But it's not only the superrich who ignore the plight of the likes of Lazarus. *We* tend to look away and ignore suffering and need at our doorstep as well. *We* are rich (even though we may not think of ourselves as rich): feasting sumptuously every day (we even go on diets because we eat too much), with closets overflowing with clothing. But there's something that keeps us from sharing and caring as much as we could. Our argument may be: aren't there social services? Don't we pay taxes for that? Shouldn't the poor pull themselves up by the bootstraps? Are we enabling people by helping them?

But I think we're also under the strong influence of fear and anxiety: will I have enough if I share, especially as I am approaching or going through old age, on a fixed income? Being old is expensive, especially in this country!

And this fear and anxiety is stoked by many leaders of rich nations – and the current administration of the U.S. as well. Have you followed the news lately? Many of the wealthy and powerful nations in this world have experienced or are experiencing a shift to the far right – as fears are stoked that the poor, the needy, the migrants are taking away what is ours, that they threaten the fabric of our superior societies.

Any social commentary, any voices that call for compassion and social justice in a system that is rigged in favor of those with money and power, and in which the poor are exploited, any appeal to the superrich to contribute to the commonwealth, are ridiculed and shot down – ah, that's the radical left, that's woke nonsense. Bah, humbug! We like to watch 'A Christmas Carol' during the holiday season, because it makes us warm and cozy, and there is a happy ending – Scrooge and Tiny Tim don't die, at least not immediately – but we don't seem to heed the timeless message, and the spirits that visit us today – and let me tell you, the specter of the future looks quite scary right now. We better turn around, or else!

We are being warned, admonished, challenged – be it by Charles Dickens, Jesus himself, or Paul. I mean, Paul's line, 'those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil', basically sums it up. When we love money more than people and relationships, community erodes, and the world goes to hell in a handbasket. Our relationship with God erodes as well and becomes a hollow shell, since, as we read

in the first letter of John, how can we love God whom we can't see if we can't love our neighbor – the neighbor at our doorstep, whom we can see very clearly? But it probably is easier to love some abstract power than actually put in the hard work of loving some very concrete people in word and deed...

As times are getting darker – and remember, darkness is cheap! – we are called to let our lights so shine, our precious lights, which don't come cheap, but with effort and even at the high price of our pride, comfort, and the convenience of ignorance. We are called to love and care about the Lazarusses, the Tiny Tims, and even Scrooges of this world – the latter suffering poverty as well, albeit in different ways. We are called to share good news for all in word and deed – the good news about God's kingdom, in which there will be enough for all, and justice and peace reign.

I want to close with a story from the Jewish tradition.

An old rabbi asked his pupils how they could tell when the night had ended and the day had begun.

'Could it be,' one of the students asked, 'when you can see an animal in the distance and tell whether it's a sheep or a dog?'

'No,' answered the rabbi.

Another asked, 'Is it when you can look at a tree in the distance and tell whether it's a fig tree or a peach tree?'

'No,' answered the rabbi.

'Then what is it?' the pupils demanded.

'It is when you can look in the face of any person and see that it is your brother, your sister, your sibling. Because if you cannot see this, it is still night.'

Darkness is cheap. Living in the light, sharing the light, comes at a price – but it precious beyond measure.

Amen

