

Luke 16:19-31

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He 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.” But 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. Besides 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.” He said, “Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house—for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.” Abraham replied, “They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.” He said, “No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.” He 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.” ’

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The Most Important Word

Here’s a marvelous theological party game, one I’m sure all of you will want to try at your next dinner party: What’s the most important word in the Bible?

Now I acknowledge that this particular game may not be your idea of a really fun time. But bear with me and imagine; pretend it’s a scintillating question, in your world, as it is in mind. The most important word in the Bible?

Our minds spin -- there could be so many answers. Who knows? The most important word in the Bible? Could it be God, or Jesus; maybe sin or forgive.... Could it be mercy or repent or love?

A professor at Duke says it’s none of these. “The most important word in all the Bible is ‘With.’ “With.”¹

¹ Samuel Wells, “Rethinking Service,” *The Cresset*, Easter 2013 (Vol. LXXXVI, No. 4, N pp. 6-14) http://thecresset.org/2013/Easter/Wells_E2013.html

So Jesus promises his dear disciples, the last time he sees them, "Behold, I will be with you always, even unto the end of the age." We rise to our feet here at in morning prayer, to say, "The Lord be with you." "And with thy spirit."

We end morning prayer with the benediction, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the holy Spirit, be with us all evermore."

With us. As Sara Miles, Director of Ministry at St. Gregory of Nyssa Church in San Francisco, says: "God sticks with us. Accompanies us. Delights in us, plays with us, suffers and abides with us, in trouble and in doubt, when everything goes perfectly and when things fall apart: God is with us."² Never leaving.

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Here on Homecoming Sunday we celebrate being *with* one another again, steadily, steadfastly, despite our differences. Coming to be *with* one another, Sunday after Sunday, and *with* God. Coming to be with one another, despite differences, because being with one another is how we come to learn, most deeply, that God is with us, even when we don't deserve it.

There's such power in showing up, in just being with someone.

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Last Sunday, at my installation, my joy was so full. I relished being with all of those gathered here, overflowing, even up into our balcony; being with all of you at the parsonage afterwards, definitely overflowing. Just being with you all and with God, in this space, entering into our covenant that we will live with one another, here, doing our best to follow Jesus.

Some of you came, not knowing me well yet, but being willing to be with me on this occasion, to be again with one another. Some of my longtime friends came, who have been with me from high school on – Andy Ebbott, from White Bear Lake Minnesota who raised his children here – and those who were with me the very first day of college; with me, madly helping me type my thesis at college's very end. Those who had been with me in law school, as I married and bore children, as I struggled and wept, as I rose and fell, showing up last Sunday to be with me again – there can be nothing better.

Being with one another. Showing up.

² Sara Miles, "The Most Important Word in the Bible," Daily Episcopalian, July 21, 2013 http://www.episcopalcafe.com/daily/mission/the_most_important_word_in_the.php

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The story Jesus told in today's lesson is about what happens when we're *not* with one another, when we let walls and gates and fences divide us.

The rich man had been so close, physically, to Lazarus, the beggar just outside his gate, but the two had never been with one another. A gate divided them. The beggar would have loved to have even the crumbs from Lazarus' table – he “longed” for those crumbs, Jesus said. But he didn't receive them. Instead, the dogs came to lick the untended wounds of poor Lazarus, lying on the other side of the gate from the rich man's house.

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In our own ways, each of us knows what it's like to be left outside, barred from some group or some place that we long to be part of. When you feel like there is a huge metal gate as solid as the heavy black fence surrounding this church, a gate between you and what you want: the friends you wish you had, the club you'd like to join, the respect you crave, the acceptance for who you are, warts and all. That would such a relief!

Each of us can picture ourselves standing on one side of the heavy metal gate here at King's Chapel, peering through the bars, seeing just what we want on the other side, but not able to get there; reaching our hands out through the bars, but not able to touch it. Lazarus, looking through the gates protecting the rich man's house, seeing the inner table filled with sumptuous food, but not being able to be with the guests...

We've all been Lazarus, some time.

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For years, I've worked on issues related to homelessness. At Trinity Church in Copley Square, we partnered with Pine Street Inn to open a home for formerly homeless men and women on Park Drive. With Jim Greene, Boston's Director of Boston's Emergency Shelter Commission, I've led Good Friday worship services in the Back Bay alleys and by the Public Library grates where our homeless sisters and brothers sleep. I've hosted art exhibits for CommonArt, where Emmanuel Genovese volunteers on Wednesdays, where homeless men and women create their art.

When outside government, I've lobbied legislators to fund programs for the homeless, and while inside government, I've worked on policies to end homelessness once and for all.

But all this doing *for* is different than being *with* the women, and men and children. My friend Joan spends her days *with* women and men living on the street or in

shelters in Waltham. She is a companion. She listens. She shows up. She is *with* people early in the morning at McDonalds, until the library opens and people can move inside there. She knows where people usually sit around the park, and she joins them on their bench. Joan drops by the motel where homeless families live in one room, and knits with the group of women once a week as they talk.

And when I sometimes show up to be with her there, I face into fact that I stand only one lucky break away from being on the other side of the gate.

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Many of you also teach me about the power of being with one another: You sit with someone with Alzheimers. You play with little children, enjoying them; You sling a hammer, as a partner, alongside those for whom the Habitat house is being built, talking together about life.

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In Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus, there are two things that keep the men apart: in life, it is the rich man's gate. But after death, according to Jesus' parable, it is a chasm between heaven and hell that can't be crossed. Lazarus is "with" father Abraham in heaven, and the rich man lies in torment in hell. Now it is the rich man longing for help from Lazarus. "Please, father Abraham," cries the rich man, "send Lazarus to me with just a drop of water on his finger to quench my thirst that my torment may be lessened."

"I can't," says Abraham. "There is a unbreachable chasm between us, another divide."

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As Universalists, this church disputes the notion that some of us will lie in a hell we can never escape. A God of Love, who urges us to forgive, invites us all into life everlasting. We are Universally saved, regardless of belief or even action, we would say.

I have always found compelling the understanding C.S. Lewis has of the divide between Heaven and Hell, as he explained in the masterpiece, The Great Divorce.

When there are divides, says Lewis, they are always of our own choosing. At any time, in this life or the next, if we want to be with one another, and with God, we need only say the word. God wants to be with us, all of us; God wants all of us to be united as one, with no chasms in between. But the choice is always ours, because God, in abundant love, gives us free will.

The problem for the rich man in our parable is that he still insists on seeing Lazarus as less than he is. The rich man still thinks Lazarus is a servant, who should be sent like a slave by Abraham down to soothe the rich man's thirst; Lazarus should be sent, like a messenger boy, back to his brothers to warn them of their fate. The rich man doesn't even speak to Lazarus directly, and will only deign to speak to Abraham, a man of stature. And never is there any word of pain for Lazarus, and how he used to live. There is never any apology offered. The rich man continues to be worried only for himself and his own family.

When we refuse to be with one another, all others, then *we* dig chasms that are unbreachable between us; *we* erect gates of our own making. *We* cut ourselves off from the heaven that can be ours.

The poor rich man still is not choosing to be with Lazarus. Still is not choosing to cross the divide created when we view any other person as less worthy than we, as beneath us, as not worth our time, our effort, in crossing the divide.

In the words of CS Lewis, "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.' All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. For those who knock it is opened." ³ "The choice of every lost soul can be expressed in the words 'Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.'" ⁴

"What are we born for?" "For infinite happiness," said the Spirit. "You can step out into it at any moment..."⁵

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Dear Friends, on this homecoming Sunday, hear these words: None of us will ever truly be home, until *all* are home. Our church will never be whole again, until all feel welcome here.

Our own spiritual lives will never deepen as richly as they can, until we learn to be *with* one another, showing up in this place, reaching out again across any divides. I've heard a little rumor that there have been a few conflicts in the past – over the issues that every church has divided over, from time immemorial: over who has the best interests of this place at heart, over who has power over money, over who knows best how to worship.

³ C.S. Lewis, The Great Divorce, MacMillan Publishing (1979), pp. 72-73

⁴Ibid., p. 69

⁵Ibid., p. 61

I am not saying that we must be all things to all people. I am saying that we have to be willing to be with one another, authentically – we need to do more talking to one another, than talking about one another. We need to call on the phone rather than email. Take someone out for coffee and really ask them how they are, before diving into the issue about which you disagree.

Do we know one another's heartaches? Each of us has open wounds, sores that dogs are licking – do you see that, know that, from your perch? I don't think the rich man really could see Lazarus' agony because the gates were closed, or he'd learned to shut his eyes as he walked past.

When we gather at lunch today, can we talk first with those who are on the other side of our particular gate, maybe those we think want to keep us out? Can Lazarus reach out to the rich man, can the rich man rise up and walk over to Lazarus and see him with new eyes, as another beloved child of God?

Because when we really are with one another, then the gates fall, the chasms close, and heaven is known where there once was hell.

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Earlier this month our Community Action Committee voted to partner with a new organization, one of our closest neighbors, the New England Shelter for Homeless Veterans, one block from here on Court Street. One of every three men who are homeless is a vet – someone who fought for us, for you and me, for our country. Half of these homeless vets now suffer mental illness or addiction or both – the ravages of our systematic teaching of young people how to methodically kill each other.

David Wheeler, one of our ushers two weeks ago, and a professor at Suffolk, is a longtime supporter of the Shelter. Ask him about it. Leslie Donovan, wife of John Bowman, Chair of our Buildings and Grounds Committee, is one of the historic preservationists working right now with the Shelter as they plan upcoming renovations, including the creation of the new women's apartments being built for women veterans. Cathy Price, member of our vestry, chair of the Search Committee for our Assistant Minister, who right now is at the Parish House helping set up our luncheon, is a vet herself. As a nurse practitioner, Cathy has volunteered at the Shelter. Ask any of them about the men and women there. What will happen to me or you or our church when we learn to be with those living right around the corner from us?

I don't know, but I have a feeling Jesus would say we'll understand heaven on earth a bit more.

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What's the most important word in the Bible?

With.

You with me. Me with you. Us with one another. Us with this City. Across all divides.

As Carl Scovel, our minister emeritus, preached at the installation last Sunday, Jesus is the vine, we are the branches, and apart we can do nothing. But when we abide – when we stay with one another, with the Force of all Love, then we know the deepest homecoming of all.

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Sung:

O Master, from the mountain side,
Make haste to heal these hearts of pain;
Among these restless throngs abide
O tread the city's streets again.

'Til sons of men shall learn thy love
And follow where thy feet have trod,
'Til glorious from thy heaven above
Shall come the City of our God.⁶

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May it be so.

⁶ Frank Mason North, "Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life" (1905), vv. 5-6