

Text: [Luke 16:19-31](#)
Date: September 15, 2019
Title: “Jesus the Prophet: Caring for the Least”
Theme: The poor matter to God, and should matter to us too.

Intro

Last week, we began our series on Jesus the Prophet by talking about how
Jesus – like the prophets before him –
Are the friends we need, but not necessarily the friend we want
Because they’re willing to call us out when we’ve drifted away from what’s
real and true
That they call us back – to relationship and repentance when we allow
other things to take God’s place

This week, we’re going to get a bit more specific and talk about one of the
characteristic concerns of the prophets
How we treat the poor and others at the edges of our society

1

As school was getting ready to start, I was reflecting on a memory I had of
the last night of summer vacation
I was probably starting 5th or 6th grade
And in the neighborhood, we decided to have a game of baseball
Which was pretty rare
Because there weren’t a lot of kids around – there just weren’t that many
houses on my street
– and so if you were going to play baseball you really needed
EVERYBODY to play
But this particular night, EVERYBODY played
It was a great memory – maybe my ONLY memory of a real neighborhood
baseball game
I think about it every year when school rolls around

But there's one piece I block out – or try to
Picking the teams – you know what I'm talking about?
Man, I hated when it came time to pick teams
I was the youngest kid in the neighborhood
I was little and really skinny and so I couldn't hit the ball too far or too well
My fielding wasn't great
And to be honest, I just wasn't all that athletic
So I ALWAYS got picked last

Every once in a while, the older kids would kind of turn things around and
let the young kids be the captains, which was a great kindness
But growing up, I certainly had my share of being last picked – in the
neighborhood, at recess, in gym, wherever
And if you ever had that experience, you know it's not fun
To feel set aside, unimportant, or excluded

2

There is a chapter in a commentary on the gospels with one of the best
titles in all of biblical studies:
“A Kingdom of Nuisances and Nobodies”¹

Which is a beautiful way of saying that Jesus cares about the people who
are last picked – for whatever reason
In fact, if you step back and consider his whole ministry, what you come to
realize is that almost everything he did was focused on people others
considered either nuisances or nobodies

Tax collectors
Prostitutes
The poor
Lepers
The disabled
The demon-possessed
Children
Women

These were the people he ministered to
He wasn't afraid to be seen with them
To speak with them

To reach out and touch them – whether to heal or simply to welcome them
To EAT with them
This was no small thing in Jesus' time – or in ours
Whom you ate with defined your social standing – it still does – particularly
when you consider the people you choose to invite TO your home

Assuming you actually invite people to your house from time to time –
today many of us never have anyone except family in!
Consider this: when was the last time you welcomed someone of a
different:
Religion, race, ethnicity, political persuasion, or level of income into your
home?
We think that we are so far beyond the people of the first century
So much more enlightened and egalitarian
I'm not so sure
Compared to Jesus, I think we have a long way to go

3

There was a certain rich man who clothed himself in purple and fine
linen, and who feasted luxuriously every day. At his gate lay a certain
poor man named Lazarus who was covered with sores. Lazarus
longed to eat the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table.
(Luke 16:19-21a)

The prophets, when they spoke on behalf of the poor, did it by standing up
and denouncing injustice
“How dare you crush my people, and grind the faces of the poor?”
Isaiah wanted to know (Isaiah 3:15)

Jesus likewise shared the prophets' concern for the poor
But he took a different approach
He told stories

Like this one about a rich man, who every day in walking out of his
mansion, had to step over a poor soul begging on the sidewalk
Now I know what you may be wondering – is this story about the same
Lazarus that Jesus raised from the dead?
No, I'm sure it's not. If anything, I think Lazarus and his sisters were
actually quite well-off.

This is just a story Jesus told. But it's a powerful one.
As vivid as it is, people sometimes want to use it to build a theology of
heaven and hell
But I wouldn't advise pressing the details that hard

What IS striking to me about the story is the rich man's attitude
Here he is in hell
And he's still giving orders – he still feels entitled!

“Abraham, do this”
“Send Lazarus to help me!”
And when Abraham refuses, then it's “well, at least send Lazarus to save
my brothers!”

All of this is very awkward, because I would be willing to bet that in all the
time Lazarus laid outside his door,
this man probably never once greeted him by name!
Why do I say that?
Because if the man had greeted Lazarus by name, he eventually would
have been obliged to help him
We help humans – we don't help nameless “things”

And now, all of a sudden, it's like, “Hey Lazarus, my old friend, can't you
help me out?”
It's the name of the rich man that's been forgotten in the story

4

In Jesus' story, it's the rich man who has become the ultimate outsider
“A great chasm – a great crevasse – has been fixed between us” Jesus
says
“And those who wish to cross over cannot”

There are perhaps no greater warnings Jesus has than warnings against
riches
Doesn't he say, “It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of an needle
than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God?” (Luke 18:25)

And doesn't he also say:

"Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God"? (Luke 6:20)

Not that any of us are striving for poverty in order to enter the kingdom!

To be honest, most of us probably don't tend to see ourselves in either of those categories – whether poor or rich

We likely see ourselves as somewhere in the middle

But statistically speaking, most of us can't escape the fact that we are, by the measure of most people in the world, rich

If you want to see how you compare to the rest of the globe, here's an interesting tool for doing that: globalrichlist.com <show **website**>

And what you'll see is that if your income is, say, \$61,000 a year – about the median US household income – you're in the top 0.2% of the world's population – not the US population, but the WORLD

That's eye-opening, for sure

Sometimes, when a pastor talks about wealth and poverty

About justice for people on the margins of society – for whatever reason

People say that's politicizing the gospel

I think one message I want you to take away today is that those elements – concern for the poor and those on the outside –

have ALWAYS been present in the gospel

They're not add-ons but fully present from the start of Jesus' ministry

Jesus was unique in that he could tell a story about a poor man lying on the street, the dogs licking his sores

And the rich man who stepped over him

And then be the one who would provide bread for 5000 people who otherwise might not have eaten that day

One of our well-known pastors in the UMC, Mike Slaughter, likes to say it this way: "if it's not good news for the poor, it's not good news"

That's kind of a play on a line from Jesus' inaugural sermon, which is itself a line from Isaiah 61

And in a few weeks, we'll talk about that story, and how much trouble that sermon got Jesus into

5

But I want to close with a different kind of story, about a friend of mine who is building a new ministry on the basis of the idea that in order to be good news, it has to be good news for the poor <slides>

Michael Reed is working in Trenton on a new project called “The Maker’s Place” – a collaborative effort between our churches in Trenton, the annual conference, and supported by congregations around NJ

The concept is to build a community by meeting a need

And the first need Michael identified was to serve young children & their families

Specifically, through distributing diapers

Last year, they collected – get this – 80,000 diapers (he initially hoped to get 10,000)

And this year, they’ve been giving them away to families through pop-up, impromptu birthday parties for kids approaching their 1st birthday

Yesterday, they had one of their parties – this one for a dozen kids, and 250 people came out to celebrate with lunch, free diapers, and connections to health & family resources

This is a Jesus kind of ministry

Because Michael’s aim is not just to distribute diapers

But to build up a community

To say, “you’re not a nobody, you’re somebody”

Jesus the Prophet

Called Lazarus by name

And by doing that, he made this point: you matter

The poor matter to God

And if we want to follow Jesus, the poor need to matter to us too

Amen.

By Joe Monahan, Medford UMC, Medford NJ

¹ From John Dominic Crossan’s *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (Harper SanFrancisco, 1994).