

**First Baptist Church of Augusta**  
**Psalm 113; Luke 16:19-31**  
***Issues the Church Should Care About: The Poor***  
**May 4, 2008**

NRS Luke 16:19 *"There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. 20 And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, 21 who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. 22 The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. 23 In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. 24 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.'* 25 *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. 26 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.'* 27 *He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house-- 28 for I have five brothers-- that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.'* 29 *Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.'* 30 *He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.'* 31 *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.'"*

Today, approximately 16,000 children died in this world. I am not sure if you read it in the Sunday news. In fact, I am sure you did not. I checked the Augusta Chronicle this morning and did the same with the New York Times. It was reported, that the horse that placed second in the Kentucky Derby was euthanized there on the track, due to multiple fractures but it was not mentioned that 16,000 children died in the last 24 hours. The troubling fact is, that about the same number will die tomorrow and the day after that, and so on. Every five seconds a child dies in this world because of hunger related causes. It comes at such a frequency that it is no longer newsworthy. Nobody cares. Do you think God cares?

I am sorry to begin on such a somber note. I know that by now, you have picked up that my preaching style is to begin whimsically. Disarm you with humor, and share with you the gospel, the good news. But there is just no humorous way to begin a message about poverty, one of the issues this church should be concerned about. The church should be concerned about it, because the Bible is concerned about it. From the Hebrew Scriptures, we call the Old Testament, to the Greek Scriptures, we call the New Testament, more than 300 verses address the poor and oppressed. In fact, Jesus identified in Luke 4:18, that the core of his very mission was to the poor. He said in the Temple:

*"The Lord's Spirit  
has come to me,  
because he has chosen me  
to tell the good news  
to the poor.*

To address the issue of poverty, I am sharing with you a story from Luke chapter 16, that begins with verse 19. This story of the rich man and Lazarus just knocks my socks off, it blows me away every time. There are three main characters in the story: a rich man, who has no name, a poor man named Lazarus, and Abraham, the chosen one of God, who is called The Father of All. The rich man dresses well and eats well, while outside his very house, is Lazarus who is poor, sickly and hungry. They die, and Lazarus is redeemed, but the rich man is in Hades - an other-worldly place of torment. Abraham is playing the role of gatekeeper, so to speak, and describes Lazarus' condition on earth as evil – his poverty, his sickness and his hunger were “evil things” (v. 25). There will be no relief, however, for the rich man because, it is implied, he ignored the needs of the one outside his gates. And because he ignored Lazarus, he ignored “Moses and the Prophets,” which is another way of saying, he ignored the scriptures that call on the believer's responsibility to the poor. The rich man's family

is apparently doomed as well, because they too, ignore the scriptures. Listen again to the last verse of this story: *'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'* (v. 31) Do you know anybody that rose from the dead?

Lazarus suffered three interrelated issues that still plague the world today:

- 1) Poverty, which we may simply understand, as the lack of material goods to meet the basic needs for quality of life.
- 2) Sickness, which Jesus starkly describes as the dogs licking his sores, adding further humiliation to Lazarus' state.
- 3) Hunger, as Lazarus longed to eat the scraps that fell from the rich man's table, but apparently was even denied that meager solace.

The first question I want to pose for us this morning is: *Who Are the Poor Outside our Doorstep?*

Who sits on the margin of what is socially acceptable? Who is on the fringe? The homeless, to be sure, but who else? Could it be the welfare mom, clutching her food stamps and holding up everyone else in the checkout line? What about the nearly nine million children who are uninsured in our country, and therefore denied adequate healthcare? Is it the man suffering the shame of a failed business and facing bankruptcy? What about the developmentally disabled, who cannot afford the expensive medicines needed, and so is debilitated to the point of desperation.

The thing is, I can understand the rich man. I identify with the rich man. Maybe he thought that Lazarus was just another sorry beggar, too lazy to get out and work a decent job. The thought crosses my mind. And yet, I find it difficult to believe that the more than 26,000 unemployed persons in the state of Georgia are all too lazy to work. Some of those numbers I know are folks that lost their jobs because their employment went overseas. Then, there are farmers who because of drought and excessive debt, lost the farms - which means they lost their homes. According to the Department of Veteran Affairs about one third of the adult homeless population have served in the armed forces, including veterans of the war in Iraq. Whether we are talking about Washington D.C., or Augusta, Georgia, the poor and destitute of this world are not just those that are too lazy to get a job - they are people a lot like Lazarus. The parable is still alive today.

Let's be careful with this story. It is, I do not believe, an indictment against riches or even wealth. No where in this story is the rich man condemned for being rich. Notice also, that in this story, we do not find the rich man mistreating Lazarus - no explicit mistreatment anyway. Jesus did not say he beat him, had him thrown in jail, because he was on part of his property, or even ran him off.

The second question is this: *What Did he Not Do?*

Our attention moves not to what the rich man did *not* do, but what he *did* do. Perhaps the largest judgment against the rich man, was not simply that he did not help Lazarus, but that he *ignored* Lazarus. What disturbs me personally, is my own inclination to simply ignore the vast needs all around me and pretend that they do not exist. After all, so my sub-conscious rationalization goes, my life is fine, so that must mean everybody else is fine. My refrigerator is full, in fact, we often throw out food that has gone bad. I have money in my checking and savings account, and investments for retirement, my home is solid, comfortable and beautiful, and I have insurance to cover the health needs for my family and me. Most of the time I have no reason to see Lazarus outside my doorstep. If we believe the Bible, however, and I happen to believe it, my ignoring will have an accounting one day.

The rich man ignored him and did not feed him, even allowing the scraps to be discarded as garbage. How many times have we gone to the wastebasket at the dinner table, or at a meal at church, and discarded food as garbage? The average family in America, by the way, throws away \$590 worth of edible meat, fruits, vegetables, and grain. Neither did the rich man nurse him, or shelter him. **He ignored him.** Maybe that was

his greatest sin - pretend he's just not there. The rich man didn't seem to want to acknowledge the existence of someone as destitute as Lazarus. The rich man spent all his day wearing the best of clothes and living the high life, completely oblivious that someone was outside his door longing just to eat his garbage. As dogs hovered around the poor man like vultures circling a carcass, the rich man didn't want to know and didn't care.

In other stories Jesus cautions those who simply ignore those on our doorstep. In Matthew 25 the unrighteous are condemned because:

*...for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.'*

*... 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'* (42-43, 45)

Oddly enough, I still understand the rich man. I identify with him! I don't want to see those on the margins. You know who I am talking about – anyone that makes us feel uncomfortable, angry or embarrassed. They may be homeless. They may be mentally challenged. They may just be socially unacceptable. I try to pretend they are just not there.

The great sin of the rich man, I still contend, was not that he was wealthy. He very well could have worked hard and honestly for his money. The great sin of the rich man was omission, apathy, "I'll just pretend he is not there." Worse yet is to make up excuses and say: "Well, if Lazarus would just get a job!" or "He's just too sorry - always looking for a handout." Funny, every time I pass a panhandler or a bag lady, I want to look the other way - denial, omission, apathy.

It is a story of authenticity. It is very true, that some of us in here do not enjoy the immense and extravagant luxury as described of the rich man. We do not find ourselves wearing name-brand clothing, nor do we wine and dine daily in nice restaurants. Some of you may even feel as destitute as the poor man Lazarus. Maybe you have to shrewdly monitor your expenses on groceries and clothes, but that does not mean you have nothing in common with the rich man. There are times that we become so self-oriented, that we cannot see beyond ourselves to the "hurting other." Authentic existence calls us to move beyond the egotism that is solely consumed in one's self, instead of consumed in the community.

The final question is this: *What are We Going to Do?*

The kingdom of God is existential in nature - **it is discovering our being in the well-being of others.** Seeing for ourselves the pain and struggle of others, reaching out beyond our own hardships, to show that we care for the hardships of others. Self-indulgent lifestyles are found in the rich and poor alike. The gospel of Jesus is "other-oriented." It is concerned for the community as well as the individual.

This story is not about the exploitation of the poor, because we do not know that was the situation of the rich man and Lazarus. It is the great exploitation of the self. Society and culture has become so self conscious, self-oriented, self-indulgent and self-centered, that we are losing meaning of the concept of community. The parable is not a condemnation against the rich. Rather, it is a judgment against the self-absorbed.

Have we not read how many times the disciples of Jesus just could not see beyond their own self-interest and so they shooed children away, hushed blind beggars, and scolded scandalized women. It is all there in the Gospels. And it is all around us.

A self absorbed life cannot let the light of Christ shine. Let us shine the light and deal with poverty right here in our church. Every Tuesday volunteers assemble to interview, counsel and provide support to families who come to us as our guest. Since the beginning of this year we have assisted **358** families, which included **420** children. Research from the journal *Pediatrics*, shows that preschool and school-aged children who experience severe hunger have higher levels of chronic illness, anxiety and depression, and behavior problems,

than children with no hunger. No child should ever, ever be hungry, no matter what choices their guardian has made.

May our light shine in our region. One way is through support of Golden Harvest Food Bank, which has served over 140,000 senior adults in this 30 county region. In addition, they have served nearly 194,000 children in the same region. During the year, it is not uncommon for a child to receive only one hot meal a day, and that will be the free lunch they are provided at school.

And may our light shine throughout the world. Before you, on the pew racks, are green envelopes that are a way for you to give above your tithes and offerings to help poverty, not only locally but worldwide. One hundred percent of the contributions made through the green envelope are used for the mission causes listed. According to the National Association of Evangelicals, a ten percent reduction in poverty equals a 30 percent reduction in abortions. If we are serious about family values, then we must be serious about the issues of poverty.

Every life is a significant life in God's estimation. As for the things of this world that we spend so much time acquiring, protecting and defending, they are just that - things.

Matthew 5:16 says: "...let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." How can we do less?

#### **Resources for further study:**

A United Nations report states that 854 million people in the world suffer from the effects of hunger.

The organization, Bread for the World reports: In developing countries nearly 16 million children die every year from preventable and treatable causes. Sixty percent of these deaths are from hunger and malnutrition. In the United States, 11.7 million children live in households where people have to skip meals or eat less to make ends meet. That means, one in ten households in the U.S. are living with hunger or are at risk of hunger.

To explore how you can be a part of our church's Benevolence Ministry which includes a food pantry, financial and legal counseling, as well as assistance with utilities, please contact our Minister of Missions and Faith Development, Kelly Hamilton (706) 733-2236 [khamilton@fbcaugusta.org](mailto:khamilton@fbcaugusta.org) or his Administrative Assistant, Susan Perkins (706) 733-2236 ext.208 [sperkins@fbcaugusta.org](mailto:sperkins@fbcaugusta.org).

The World Food Program (<http://www.wfp.org/english/>) is the food aid arm of the United Nations whose mission is to meet emergency needs and support economic and social development in the world.

Bread for the World (<http://www.bread.org/>) is a collective Christian voice urging our nation's decision makers to end hunger at home and abroad.

Golden Harvest Food Bank (<http://www.goldenharvest.org/>) is a locally-supported, nonprofit, charitable food distribution center that provides grocery products to the hungry through our partner agencies, including our own church's Benevolence Ministry and Food Pantry. Their service area encompasses 30 counties within Georgia and South Carolina.

Compassion International (<http://www.compassion.com>) exists as a Christian child advocacy ministry that releases children from spiritual, economic, social and physical poverty and enables them to become responsible, fulfilled Christian adults.

World Relief (<http://www.wr.org/>) The Mission of World Relief, as originated within the National Association of Evangelicals, is to work with, for, and from the Church to relieve human suffering, poverty, and hunger worldwide in the name of Jesus Christ.