

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Luke 16:19-31

"There once was a rich man, expensively dressed in the latest fashions, wasting his days in conspicuous consumption. A poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, had been dumped on his doorstep. All he lived for was to get a meal from scraps off the rich man's table. His best friends were the dogs who came and licked his sores.

"Then he died, this poor man, and was taken up by the angels to the lap of Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In hell and in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham in the distance and Lazarus in his lap. He called out, 'Father Abraham, mercy! Have mercy! Send Lazarus to dip his finger in water to cool my tongue. I'm in agony in this fire.'

"But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that in your lifetime you got the good things and Lazarus the bad things. It's not like that here. Here he's consoled and you're tormented. Besides, in all these matters there is a huge chasm set between us so that no one can go from us to you even if he wanted to, nor can anyone cross over from you to us.'

"The rich man said, 'Then let me ask you, Father: Send him to the house of my father where I have five brothers, so he can tell them the score and warn them so they won't end up here in this place of torment.'

"Abraham answered, 'They have Moses and the Prophets to tell them the score. Let them listen to them.'

"I know, Father Abraham,' he said, 'but they're not listening. If someone came back to them from the dead, they would change their ways.'

"Abraham replied, 'If they won't listen to Moses and the Prophets, they're not going to be convinced by someone who rises from the dead.'"

In 1999, Dr Paul Brand and Philip Yancey co-wrote a book called Pain: the Gift Nobody Wants. Dr Brand was born in India to missionary parents, and has spent most of his life caring for people with leprosy. One of Dr Brand's greatest discoveries was that people with leprosy do not have "bad flesh" that just rots away. Actually, their flesh is as healthy as yours, or mine. The problem is that blood flow is restricted to certain parts of their body, and their nerve endings die.

With this death of their nerve endings comes the inability to sense danger to their bodies. Lepers live pain free.

Don't you wish you could live pain free? Not when you realize that this absence of pain is the greatest enemy of the leper. Again and again, they harm their bodies, without even knowing it. They feel no pain. Dr Brand knew that lepers often went blind. Why? Because they didn't blink. They didn't blink because they didn't feel the pain that we feel when our eyes dry out. Dr Brand solved this problem by surgically attaching the chewing muscle to their eyelid - and then teaching them to chew gum.

Dr Brand was puzzled by the fact that lepers often lost fingers and toes overnight. He knew that they weren't simply disappearing into thin air, so he commissioned workers to observe the lepers sleeping. To their surprise, they found that rats would come in and nibble the exposed fingers and toes. The lepers, who did not feel pain, never awoke to brush them away.

As the title of the book says, pain is the gift that nobody wants. So is regret. You know what we call someone that has no regrets? A psychopath! Without remorse, nothing leads to change.

In the parable that was read for us today, Jesus tells the story of a rich man who was "dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day". The man died, and after he was buried, he finds himself in Hades where he was being tormented.

He was miserable. He doesn't seem to understand why he needs to suffer, and he cries out for help to Abraham who he sees in distant heaven. Abraham's response was to point out that the rich man was very well off in life; he had everything and more that he needed; but there were others around him who did not have it so good. Abraham's message to the rich man poses the question, indirectly perhaps, why didn't you do something to help the less fortunate.

Does the rich man now have any regrets? Jesus implies that he does. But none of his regrets involve poor business decisions or missed opportunities to make money. He had all the money he needed and could afford to do whatever he wanted. No, the rich man's regrets seem to go in a different direction.

Jesus tells us in the story, that the rich man was not alone in his life and now in his death. Jesus tells us, "At the rich man's 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".

Did Lazarus have any regrets? He probably did, but his regrets probably did not include wishing he had let himself be happier. For Lazarus, happiness was not totally his choice. He had to depend on the generosity of people like the rich man to throw him leftovers from his table, which never came. The rich man gave Lazarus nothing, but interestingly, the dogs did not ignore Lazarus.

In my research I read that dogs in the Biblical and rabbinic traditions are almost as unclean as pigs. Both the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures are clear witnesses to this. Dogs are kept as guard dogs (Isaiah 56:10), never as pets. Only those who feed them dare approach them. A rich man needs such dogs because they are his "home security system." The story assumes that the guard dogs are fed the scraps Lazarus longs to eat (cf. Matthew 15:27). Lazarus goes hungry. The dogs are fed.

Yet, those wild guard dogs, whom no one but their handlers dare approach, unlike the rich man, realize that the weak, sick man by the gate is their friend. They lick his wounds. Further research says the saliva of a dog's mouth is sterile. The ancients discovered that when a dog licks a person's sores or wounds, healing occurs more rapidly. Archeologists in Aschelon, Israel, have recently uncovered a center where 1,300 dogs are buried in individual plots. The site has been identified as a Phoenician semi-religious center where the sick could go, pay a fee and have trained dogs to lick their wounds as medical treatment.

In this parable the dogs' master refuses to help the poor sick man outside his gate, but his wild guard dogs will do what they can. They will lick his wounds. Their master will not help Lazarus. They will. Lazarus' kind, caring, and gentle spirit breaks through their violent hostility to this poor man, and in return they care for him.

Jesus tells us at the beginning of the parable that "the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham, unlike the rich man who died and found himself in Hades. Lazarus is treated well in heaven, but we find that the rich man in Hades, finds himself feeling regret.

What were his regrets? First it might be reasonable to conclude that the rich man was probably thinking, *I wish that I had cared for the people around me*. He certainly had the opportunity to do that. The poor man Lazarus was lying at his gate. It was obvious that Lazarus was poor and needed help. He was covered with sores that the rich man saw every day as he

stepped over or around Lazarus each time, he left his home. Every single day, the rich man missed a chance to help Lazarus by simply giving him the leftovers from his table.

Another regret likely was that he wished that he had listened to Moses and the prophets. If he hadn't thought about this before, he certainly did after Abraham denied the rich man's request to send Lazarus to his family to warn them not to make the same mistakes he made, and Abraham responded that they already have the words from Moses and the Prophets to warn them.

But now, the rich man realizes in death that he had not paid attention to the word of God as it came through Moses, "you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18). He had not heeded the prophet Isaiah, who commanded, "share your bread with the hungry—bring the homeless poor into your house" (Isaiah 58:7).

Yet, another regret likely was that he wished he had had the courage to live a life true to himself, and not the life others expected of him. Every day, the rich man ignored poor Lazarus, fully aware of the teachings of Moses and the prophets. But he didn't have the courage to live a life of integrity, one in which his actions were in line with what he observed and what he believed.

The rich man saw the poor man and knew what he was supposed to do. He was taught the words and commands of God, but he ignored them, perhaps not intentionally. But he slipped into a trap set by people who blamed Lazarus for his poverty, insisting that he must be lazy or morally deficient. The people in his social circle whom he respected and hung out with would say, "God rewards goodness and punishes wickedness—it's always been that way! So, dress lavishly and eat sumptuously. You deserve it!" That was a common belief of the people in the days of Jesus. It is a popular assumption made about poor people today. Making assumptions such as these are dangerous. Without knowing a person's circumstances for their situation, we might make for ourselves an excuse for not helping someone when what actually turns out to be a call from God to help.

When the rich man realized that he blew it while he was alive and it was too late for him to change the end results, he thought about his brothers. As I reminded us moments ago, the rich man asked for Abraham to send Lazarus to his father's house—he had five brothers—so that Lazarus might warn them, so they would not also come into this place of torment where he was (Luke 16:27-28). Obviously, the rich man cares deeply for his brothers; he was not a man without feelings. But Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them."

The rich man realizes that Abraham was right, but he also admits that knowing the words of Moses and the prophets was not enough to get him to change his life. He tells Abraham that it will take something bigger, more shocking than the teachings of Moses and the prophets to get them to listen and change. Surely, they will turn their lives around if dead Lazarus comes back to life and warns them!

Shaking his head, Abraham says, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead".

Abraham is talking to us, right along with the rich man and his brothers. Are we convinced? Are we persuaded to change our ways if someone rises from the dead and tries to correct us and point us in a different direction? Someone was sent to us, and he did rise from the grave after dying for our sins. Jesus has risen, but many continue to do their own thing and create regrets for themselves.

Now, let's be clear. None of us is perfect, and we will all come to the end of life feeling that we have made mistakes along the way. There are choices we feel bad about, alongside opportunities we wish we had taken advantage of. We cannot go back in time and change the things we said or the things we did, nor can we change the things we did not say and do and should have, but, through our repentance and God's saving grace, we are forgiven and given another chance to avoid making the same painful mistakes that we regret.

The top regrets of the rich man can teach us the lessons that we —like the rich man's five brothers—should pay attention to every day. We don't want to leave this lifetime with regrets: *"wishing that we had cared for the people around us, wishing that we had listened to the lessons in the bible, including the words of Jesus, wishing we had had the courage to live a life true to ourselves, in which our actions were in line with our beliefs"*.

We are not yet in the afterlife, calling out to Father Abraham. We are not stuck in a place of regretting that we did not do enough, that we did not do more, that we did not choose wisely, that we did not have enough time. As long as we are breathing, we can choose to care for the people around us, listen to the teachings of the Bible and live a life that is true to our deepest convictions. If we do, we will have no big regrets.

Choices do not have to be large to be life changing. The rich man in the parable Jesus told could have simply shared some of his food with Lazarus to care for the people around him. In the same way, we can share simple acts of kindness with others and make a positive difference in someone's life. Putting our actions in line with our beliefs, living a life of integrity is a change that is made one choice at a time.

I'm going to leave you this morning with this story: It is said that Abe Mulky, who became a Texas Evangelist, went to an old-fashioned revival and was under deep conviction. He went home and said to his wife, "Mandy, what shall I do? I am lost. I am miserable. But you know we have gained our possessions crookedly and if I get religion, and make restitution, which I will have to do, we will not have a shelter over our heads. The house, the ranch, every cow, and sheep will be gone. That is what will take place, if I get religion. And if I don't get religion I will surely go to hell. What must I do, Mandy?"

Mandy replied, "Abe, get religion." Thank the Lord for Mandy. Well, Abe went back and got real religion. He immediately began to fix up. Soon all was gone. Not one thing left. One day Abe and Mandy were sitting under a tree eating some cheese and crackers. Abe looked across and said, "What about this Mandy?" She immediately and joyously replied, "It beats hell, Abe, mighty bad."

May we seek to have no regrets. Amen.