

Craig Nessian's Sermon: "Lazarus!"

Colleagues,

Three postings ago, on August 10 (ThTh #426), I reviewed the sermon I'd heard the previous Sunday on the weekend of the Schroeder clan reunion. As I weighed it, I found it wanting—and I said so. When the preacher, my good friend, Craig Nessian of Wartburg Seminary (Dubuque Iowa), read my review, he said I'd not given him a fair shake. Could be, I said, I've blundered before. So send me the text of what you preached and we'll post it as a ThTh offering as soon as you get it to me. Folks can see for themselves what's what. It just arrived. So here it is.

[My review of 3 weeks ago, what I thought I'd heard in Craig's "live" proclamation, is on the Crossings website at this URL: <https://crossings.org/thursday/2006/thur081006.shtml>]

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder

Sermon

Luke 16:19-31 – "Lazarus!"

Preacher: Craig L. Nessian Wartburg Theological Seminary

Pentecost 9 – August 6, 2006 St. Paul Lutheran Church – Davenport, Iowa

What is God trying to say to us through this very disturbing text? What images do you focus on when you visualize this story of the rich man and Lazarus? What do you feel? With whom do you identify? Even more, what is the fundamental problem that is being described?

You would be right to focus on the plight of poor Lazarus. Here we see a man who is not only poor but sick (Is his illness itself a consequence of malnutrition?). To make his humiliation all the more graphic, dogs come to nourish themselves from his sores. Lazarus is hungry for food, longing for some crumbs-which he knows that the rich man has-hungry unto death.

The plight of Lazarus is not unique in our world. Let me tell you about Angela, a woman who lives in La Estacion, literally across the tracks, in Cuernavaca, Mexico. To get to Angela's home, you have to walk alongside an open sewer, where children are playing. Her house is very small, crudely constructed from available materials. Her husband is an invalid for whom she cares. Their income is from selling Coca Colas to the neighbors and the money they receive from children who work as migrant laborers in the U.S. She also watches over many children. At the end of our conversation, Angela mentions that she is worried because the rainy season is coming and she had borrowed her roof from someone else. Can you imagine living in such a situation with a borrowed roof?

Manuel is a campesino who lives in a small village in northern Nicaragua. When we were introduced, he was asked-as we do worldwide-to tell us about his family: "How many children do you have?" Manuel replied very matter-of-factly: "I have ten children; three of them died." We learn that they died of childhood diseases, easily preventable in our context, the diseases of malnutrition, lack of clean water, inadequate health care, and poverty. What was most shocking to me is how

he said this in such a way as though it is normal to have three of your babies die in early childhood!

Each and every one of the people who will die this day of hunger-related causes has a name and a story. But to tell you even about the children would take an entire day. And I would only have a few seconds for each introduction. The existence of Lazarus in our world is very real and you would be right to focus on his plight as you hear this text.

I, however, want you to focus most of your attention on the rich man, who also has a hunger-related illness that we can diagnose as an acute case of "affluenza." Some of the visible symptoms of this illness are obvious in the text:

- 1. He is dressed in fine linen, no doubt only in designer labels.*
- 2. He lives behind a gate; he needs security to protect himself and keep at a distance from the Lazaruses of the world.*
- 3. He feasts sumptuously, probably taking in far more calories each day than he is able to burn.*

These, however, are just the outward signs of a more serious spiritual condition, a spiritual condition that will land him finally in Hades. This spiritual illness also has some very serious symptoms:

- 1. The rich man has no relationship with poor Lazarus, although he sits there day after day near the house.*
- 2. It seems that the rich man has no eyes to see the poor man. In his affluenza, his lifestyle leaves him blind to the reality of the poor.*
- 3. The rich man has no heart. He apparently does not feel compassion for Lazarus. Perhaps his emotions have been trained to disconnect from the problems of the greater*

world.

4. The rich man has no hands with which to act. He likely does not see that it is his responsibility to do anything. The problem is “too large” and after all he is “only one person.” What difference could he make?
5. Then there is the most curious condition of all: the rich man has no name. Could this be indicative of his spiritual malaise, that he desires to remain anonymous and thus without responsibility?

So who in this text has the most serious problem? In many ways you could argue that it is Lazarus. After all, he is the one facing physical hunger and death. Yet I think this text is finally a summons more to the rich of this world about their own spiritual condition, a condition that inextricably connects their wellness to the fate of the world's poor. This is a spiritual condition that apparently persists even beyond death, when the rich man still wants to order Lazarus around to do his bidding.

Hearken to the words of Abraham that cut to the heart: “They have Moses and the prophets, they should listen to them.” “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead!”

The witness of Scripture is overwhelming: we are to love our neighbor, feed the hungry, heal the sick, give water to the thirsty, and do justice to the poor. We have the books of Moses. We even have a Savior who is risen from the dead. Yet, in our condition of affluenza, we find ourselves suffering with many (if not all) of the same symptoms as the rich man.

This is a text that cries out for our attention; for our conversion. This is a text that warns us about our own spiritual state and declares that your own spiritual health is directly connected to how you relate and respond to the poor

Lazaruses of this world.

It is urgent that our lives be about re-writing this story. So as a first step in re-writing this text, let's give the rich man a name. Let's give him your own name-in my case, it's Craig, but in your case it is your name. Say your name out loud.

Second, to make this a different story: how you are going to develop a personal relationship with Lazarus? How can you get to know personally the poor people here in your city? Or, in Mississippi where your congregation is sending food as hurricane relief? Or, in another part of the world, perhaps through a global partnership? The treatment for the illness of the rich man begins with developing actual relationships with the poor of this world. How can you go about this?

Third, how can you obtain new eyes with which to see? How can you begin to see the disparity between our own plenty and the lack of basic necessities by so many in our world? How can you seek out sources of information that will keep the reality of the hungry constantly before your eyes? I think it is only by joining an organization, like Bread for the World, which holds you accountable that you will be able to sustain your seeing and keep yourself attuned day after day, month after month.

Fourth, how can you gain a new heart, a heart that feels deep compassion? Especially in a world where the images are so horrifying-from warfare as well as from chronic poverty-how can you keep open your heart? It is understandable that we want to distance ourselves from such suffering. Yet at the center of our Christian faith stands the image of the Crucified Jesus, with heart and arms wide open to invite in all the suffering ones into an embrace.

Fifth and last and most urgent of all, how do you, in direct

opposition to the rich man in our text, live as people who have hands to act? How do you certainly become people who give generously to charitable causes, like the ELCA World Hunger Program that is so cost effective at fighting hunger and its causes? But even more, how do you become a people who understand that it is essential to your vocation as Christians that you act with political responsibility? How do we gain the necessary understanding that it belongs to your Christian vocation to be active in the political sphere:

- *that when we vote, we vote not our own self-interest but in the interests of the Lazaruses of this world;*
- *that we write letters to our elected representatives to support things like the Millennium Goals for eradicating extreme poverty;*
- *that we join together to meet with our elected officials to insist that they make the needs of the poor their top priority;*
- *that we organize in our local communities in relationship and partnership with people in physical need.*

I often reflect on how we, from our historical perspective, judge the people who in their time tolerated slavery, or those who were bystanders while the Holocaust unfolded in Nazi Germany. 100 years from now, how will history judge us as people who were passive in the face of such glaring disparity?

We need a miracle. Only one thing can heal us from our spiritual illness. There is only one who can set us free from our spiritual bondage, the One crucified for you and risen from the dead, Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ died for you and for Lazarus. Jesus Christ loves you and Lazarus. Jesus Christ forgives you and claims you as his own. It is by the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ that you receive your name, new eyes, a new heart, and new hands.

Live as God's children, filled with Christ's compassion, free to act! Lazarus sits at your door step.