

"At The Gate"

Amos 6:1a, 4-7; 1 Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31

September 26, 2010

There is a great theologian by the name of Helmut Thielicke that is quoted as having said, *"The torment of the dead is that they cannot warn the living, just as it is the torment of the mature that the erring young will not listen to them."* It seemed an appropriate quote for this morning as we consider this powerful parable of Jesus dealing with the rich man and Lazarus.

There is so much in this parable - so many themes - so many directions in which a sermon could go. The parable, together with our other scriptures all deal with the use of riches and how we live our lives. The parable also raises questions about death and life after death, heaven and hell with a chasm fixed between. And, of course, there is the theme of warning and the importance of paying attention to the Word of God that we have received in the Bible. *"The torment of the dead is that they cannot warn the living, just as it is the torment of the mature that the erring young will not listen to them."* Would we listen to one who comes back from the dead? I would like to think that we would pay a great deal of attention ... But Would we? We are not great listeners. The young don't pay great heed to their parents [and I say this as one who can still vaguely remember being young with a mind of my own]. But then that kind of 'know it all' attitude is not limited to the young. I think of an interview on a news broadcast last week in which the person being interviewed was talking about a political party and saying, 'the problem with members of the _____ party is that they won't listen to anything but what they already believe to be true.' And I thought, 'Amen, brother.' But it is not just one party It is all of us. We all know what we know and we are not open to any new word. If someone came back from the dead, would we be willing to listen and change our lives?

It is an interesting question. It is also interesting that the rich man did not ask to go back from the dead himself He asked that Lazarus go to warn his family. But Abraham said no They won't listen. Would we? Would we listen to the prophet Amos when he calls the people of God to get off their ivory inlaid beds and put down their bowls of wine so that they might care for the needy? Or would we listen to the author of the letter to Timothy when he says; *"there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; ⁷for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; ⁸but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. ⁹But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains. ¹¹But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. ¹²Fight the good fight of the faith;*

It is a tough call for us to be content and care for the needs of those around us when everything else in our culture pushes us to pursue the good life. More - bigger - better It is all the rage. I read again about a TV special that aired before the death of Mother Theresa. It showed all the horror of the slums of Calcutta and her love for these destitute people. The producer interviewed her as she made her rounds in that dreadful place. Throughout the program commercials interrupted the flow of the discussion. Here is the sequence of the topics and commercials: lepers (bikinis for sale); mass starvation (designer jeans); agonizing poverty (fur coats); abandoned babies (ice cream sundaes) the dying (diamond watches). What do we see that really shapes our lives? Do we note the poverty and suffering and than say, 'I could sure go for one of those ice cream sundaes!'

The rich man lounges in his fine robes and feast on the best food every day. And just outside of his front gate lies Lazarus. Every day Lazarus lies there. Everyday the parties go on inside the gate. I am sure that Lazarus notices. But somehow the rich man does not. Oh, he probably noticed. He was probably sorry to see the suffering of Lazarus and was possibly even a bit repulsed by the open sores and weakness of the man 'out there'. But he kept the gate closed and the sumptuous meals continued.

As I thought about the parable this week I found myself focusing on the gate. I thought - 'what a marvelous invention the gate is.' Gates can keep the stuff of the world outside. Behind the gate it is sometimes very easy to ignore everything outside. Maybe you can see what is on the other side of the gate but it does not have to touch you. The rich man and Lazarus - each on different sides of the gate. I found myself wondering what is outside our gates. I wondered what it is that we don't really even want to acknowledge that lies beyond our gates. We keep the gates closed tight so that stuff outside will not touch us - even if we know that it is there, we just do not want any personal contact.

And so we stay inside the gate with all of our stuff – rich, but probably not really content.

I read a shocking and sad story this week. It involved a 67 year old woman who's name was Billie Jean James, who had been missing for four months. She was finally found in late August when her husband found her in their own home. She was a hoarder and had died and became buried under one of the mountains of trash that filled their house from top to bottom. The stuff she hoarded filled up every room. She was incapable of throwing anything, even garbage, away. The stench of trash and decay was so great in this "hoarded house" that not only did the husband live there for four months without noticing the smell of a decaying body. Even police rescue dogs, trained to detect the smell of a dead body, never detected her presence. It was not until the husband finally noticed Billie Jean's feet sticking out from under a mountainous pile of trash that his wife's body was finally discovered. If you've seen the hit reality tv show "Hoarder," you know that hoarding is now a recognized psychological disorder. This past summer was a tough one for hoarders. In addition to James' death there was another 89 year-old hoarder found dead in her cluttered home in July. It took the Skokie, Illinois fire department three hours to remove her body. And an elderly couple in Chicago was trapped for two weeks in their junk-infested house. When they were finally rescued both were covered with rat bites.

How wrapped up do we get in our stuff? Can we see over the gate? Isn't there great gain in godliness combined with contentment? And isn't everything equalized as we come to the gate of death and are welcomed by a God of love? It is an interesting parable, isn't it? Interesting but can we, will we hear the call to follow our God and trust God's loving provision enough to look over the fence and care for our neighbor? *AMEN*