

Sermon for September 25, 2016
Luke 16:19-31
The Rich Man and Lazarus

Many have used this parable to speculate about what heaven and hell will be like in the afterlife. But I think that this parable offers us more about how to live our lives now, today. This story is for the rich man's family, for all of us who have Moses and the prophets and a man who came back from the dead to guide us. It's a wake-up call telling us that God's kingdom is breaking in here and now; that we can have the abundant life that Jesus promises us now!

I don't know if Charles Dickens had this exact parable in mind when he wrote "A Christmas Carol" but there are many similarities—both in warnings and promises. We have a rich man, Ebenezer Scrooge, who has great wealth, but who is so greedy that he doesn't even use it to make himself comfortable. We meet Scrooge in a room with few candles and even less heat. He chases away carolers who are singing and collecting money for the less fortunate. He also tells the two men collecting for the poor that he won't give anything to their cause because he pays taxes for where they are housed and if they don't like it there; they should die and decrease the surplus population. Not a very likeable guy, is our Ebenezer.

Then that night, Christmas Eve, he is visited by the ghost of his late business partner Jacob Marley. And just as Father Abraham predicts, Scrooge at first doesn't believe that Jacob has come back from the dead. He believes Jacob to be food poisoning and not a warning from the afterlife. Jacob has come to warn Scrooge of the miserable life that is waiting for him on the other side. Scrooge can't understand why Jacob is so miserable, since he was always such a good business man. But Jacob warns Scrooge that they were looking after the wrong business, their lives shouldn't be about making as much money as they could at the expense of others; their business should have been about humanity. Jacob tells Scrooge that he will be visited by three ghosts to help him find his way.

It is through these visits that Scrooge learns of the happiness that he had in his earlier life and how his obsession with money and wealth destroyed that earlier happiness and is keeping him from having happiness now. He also sees the genuine joy and happiness that those without a lot of money were able to have with just each other's company. He also sees that not everyone is poor and out of work because they're lazy; sometimes circumstances work against them. He also sees what can happen to the poor when they don't have enough money to feed their family and take care of health problems with the death of Bob Crachit's son "Tiny Tim."

Scrooge is also shown what awaits him if he doesn't change his ways. A death that will happen soon and a life that no one mourns; in fact, his death brings more joy to those who owe him money than his life did. He sees his tombstone and asks why he's just been shown everything if there is no hope for him.

And then he wakes up and the joy that he feels at just being alive is overwhelming! He laughs, he cries, he dances and he decides to share his good fortune with others around him. He buys the biggest turkey for the Crachit's. He gives to the men who were collecting for the poor. He goes to his nephew's home and realizes how important family is. He promises to help Bob Crachit with his family and Tiny Tim doesn't die. At the end of the story Scrooge's life is full of light, life and happiness because he's decided to share the abundance he's been given with others.

But what I really love about this story is the ending when Scrooge is at the cemetery and he asks the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come why he's been shown the errors of his ways and the life he could have if he is beyond all hope. And isn't this how we all sometimes; feel that we're beyond hope. But we have a God who doesn't think we are beyond hope. We have a Savior who was put to death for caring for the poor, for announcing God's mercy for all, for daring to forgive the sins of any; even when greed gets in our way. And we have heard that this man was raised from the dead and came back for us to give us chance after chance to get it right; even

when we forget about Moses and the Prophets and don't see our Lazarus' as we walk over and around them.

We like Ebenezer Scrooge are given the chance to not keep it all for ourselves. Greed is concerned with getting. The Gospel we believe is concerned with giving. Just as Lazarus and Tiny Tim may need food and clothing and shelter for a more satisfying life, so the rich like Scrooge and ourselves need to be freed from selfish greed for a more satisfying life. If our whole life is centered on getting more for ourselves; we can never be satisfied. There will always be something more to get. Enough is never enough. We are given opportunities to share with others who aren't so fortunate. And like Scrooge we'll find that giving to others gives new life in two ways. It frees the giver from greed and it brings exciting new opportunities for those who receive. And today during our worship we have an opportunity to share with others as we take a Noisy Offering for the Backpack program.

Scrooge promises to keep the spirit of Christmas alive in his heart throughout the whole year, not just at Christmas. In doing so he finds a cure for an uncaring heart and realizes just where his treasure and his heart truly is.