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Title: Stories on the Way to the Cross: A Certain Man

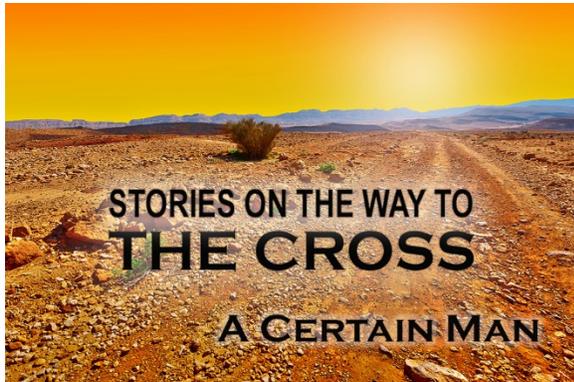
Date: March 29, 2020

Preaching: Randy Spleth, Senior Minister

Scripture: [Romans 5:1-5](#)

Text: [Luke 16:19-31](#)

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We are in the middle of a series of sermons focusing on the stories of Jesus. As Jesus makes his way from Galilee to Jerusalem, he tells stories. Luke records 10 unique stories about following him and experiencing the kingdom of God.

It is amazing how they offer timeless truths but also speak to the challenges we are facing during the global pandemic. Last week's truths, for instance, were three parables about being lost. Is anyone feeling lost right now? The third lost parable is one of the famous stories that Jesus told, The Parable of the Prodigal Son. Everybody knows that story about a certain man who had two sons. It speaks to the timeless truth and the truth for a time like this that God searches for us and we can find him by simply returning home.

That certain man is one of three parables right in the middle of this journey through Samaria found in the 15th and 16th chapters of Luke. Your Bible probably doesn't use that phrase but it is there if you translate the Greek word "Anthropos." It is simply "a certain man." Jesus wants to reinforce the connection between the three stories by starting them the same way. There was a certain man who had two sons. There was a certain man who had a dishonest manager. There was a certain man who was rich. It's like Jesus is saying, "Oh, here's another story about a certain man."¹ But I think Jesus was also doing that because we are that certain man. Or at least we could be a certain man or a certain woman if we looked through their eyes.

The story we are looking at today is the last one, about a certain man who was rich and wore purple and another who was poor and miserable with sores all over his body. His name is Lazarus and he holds the distinction of being the only character in any of Jesus' parables to be named. It is a powerful name because Jesus has a friend named Lazarus who dies. This causes Jesus to weep and it causes Jesus to bring Lazarus back to life.

This Lazarus dies too, but when he does, he isn't resurrected by Jesus. He is carried away by angels to be with Father Abraham. The rich man dies and he has just the opposite experience. He ends up in Hades where he is being tormented. Do you know this story?

I had a friend in seminary name F.D. Bonvillian. We called him Bon. Bon had owned a pub and tended bar his entire life. He started seminary when I did. I was 22 and he was 62. He said after 40 years of listening to people's problems and offering support at a bar, he thought it was time to do it right. He made a wonderful minister. Unfortunately, he fell ill with cancer and died a few years after graduation.

As a bartender, Bon told jokes. He had a joke that was so funny that every time we were around him, we wanted him to tell it. But he had tons of them. Bon made the observation that in reality, there were only 6-7 jokes. All of the jokes in the world he said are variations of one of those jokes. It's why when someone starts telling a joke, they often say, "Have you heard this?" and it might sound familiar.

And Jesus may have started the story that way, "Have you heard about a certain rich man..." and they would have nodded. They knew this story. It was an old Egyptian folk story that was retold in Palestine. Jesus added Abraham and Lazarus to make it Jewish. But they would have nodded knowing how the story goes. Only the story didn't go the way it was supposed to go. The certain guy was supposed to get a chance to send back help to his brothers. They too were blind to the suffering of Lazarus; they weren't living faithful lives either. But in Jesus telling of the joke...that is the story, he says, "Nope." What makes you think they will repent? If they don't listen to Moses and the prophets, why would they be convinced if someone rises from the dead?

With that question, Jesus turns the story from a story about heaven and hell to something about the present life. What makes you think they will repent? It points the story not on the rich man or Lazarus but directly on the five brothers who are left alive. What's their response going to be? Will they repent?

Someone sent me a meme the other day. It was a classic take on that cartoon where a guy is holding up a sign saying, "Repent, the end is near." Behind is a hospital with a long line and the words, COVID-19. The person who sent it to me simply wrote, "It feels a little bit like it is."

"Repent" is among the stock imperatives in the spiritual life. It is not a difficult word to understand. It's just not one we like to hear. It literally

means "turn around." In the biblical story repentance isn't a call to something private, rather it's a call to return to God and God's ways. And the question of the story is, "What will it take, what sort of eye-opening experience will they need to repent, to change, to become who God wants them to be?" ²

We are in the middle of an eye-opening experience. It's not just ours; it is the world's. And with it comes the discovery that we've had a lot of blind spots, people we didn't see, things we weren't doing, ways we were living that really weren't connected at all with the way Jesus wants us to live. The coronavirus has given us that opportunity.

That's not to suggest a cause and an effect theology, that God has caused this virus to get our attention. It's not God's will that thousands should die. This is rather the world that we live in where there are all sorts of diseases and illnesses that impact our lives. But I will offer that it is an opportunity for us to "repent", in small personal ways and hopefully, larger corporate ways as a people, a nation, a global community.

We have an opportunity to take stock of our lives, to think about what is important, who is important, how we should be caring for them and ourselves. We have a chance to live more like Jesus.

Do you know that a crisis is a terrible thing to waste? Some of you who've gone through personal crises' in the past have heard me say this. I have a friend who I've known since this church started. He's heard me say this each time he fails at marriage something he's done three times. He'll find himself in the same situation every time, ends up divorced but he never really changes. He ends up wasting his crisis.

If all this crisis does is cause us to wash our hands better, shake hands less, and keep more food and toilet paper on stock at home, then it will have been a waste. But if it causes us to repent, to turn back to God and God's ways, then it will be worth all of the suffering that we experience.

Adversity brings out the best in us. When I think about the times when there is has been significant growth in my life, I remember times of challenge. Those Adverse times, catastrophic times, in our own lives, in our society, and our world, when we looked back on them, they shaped us. Changed us. The Bible even teaches this. Paul writes to the church in Rome, saying, "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts" (Roman 5:3b-4).

That's something to hold on to. Suffering produces endurance; endurance, character; character hope.

The sacrifices we are making now, the suffering that we are going through today, tomorrow and over the weeks to come, will change us. The question is will it change us for the better. Will it make us more loving, more caring more compassionate, more Christ-like in our commitment to our spiritual walk, our community of faith, the way we care for one another, our community, our nation, our world.

I hope so, I pray so and encourage you to do the same. It is after all the very reason Jesus told this story with the punch line about not even being convinced if someone rises from the dead. That's exactly what happened about ten days after Jesus told this story.

That's the powerful truth to live your life by today as well as forever.

¹ Eugene H. Peterson. Tell It Slant: A Conversation on the Language of Jesus in His Stories and Prayers (Kindle Location 1241). Kindle Edition.

² Eugene H. Peterson. Tell It Slant: A Conversation on the Language of Jesus in His Stories and Prayers (Kindle Locations 1239-1241). Kindle Edition.