

Luke 16:19-31; Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15
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Ever since I was young, I've loved stories about the heroic quest. Whether it is the Lord of the Rings or Watership Down or CS Lewis, they are all tales about the quest to find or do something heroic. I've especially love the old tales about the quest for the Holy Grail, the cup that Jesus used at the Last Supper. Whenever I read the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, I can't help but remember the old legend about Sir Launfal. You probably remember this old story from medieval times about a Welsh knight named Launfal, one of the knights of King Arthur. In the legend, Sir Launfal is getting ready one evening to set out on a journey the next day. He sharpens his sword, shines his shield, and prepares his horse. Before he lies down for the night he kneels in prayer. "Dear Christ," he prays, "tomorrow I begin my great journey in your name. I ask for your blessing and guidance as I search for the Holy Grail, the cup you used the last night you ate with your disciples. Make me pure, for only if I am pure will I be worthy to be the one who will find your holy cup."

When Sir Launfal fell asleep, he soon began to dream. His dream was so real that he actually thought it was morning and he was saying goodbye to all in the castle. Proudly he rode through the gates on his great horse. This was *his* moment . . . but just on the other side of the gates, a beggar stopped him. It jarred him, to be interrupted at this moment of moments, at the start of his quest for the Holy Grail. He certainly could not be bothered with someone like a poor beggar. Disdainfully, Sir Launfal flung a penny in his direction and rode on.

Time can pass very quickly in a dream. Sir Launfal's dream covered many years. He searched everywhere for the Holy Grail. He fought many battles, but never did Christ even give him a glimpse of the cup that the Lord had used at the Last Supper. Sir Launfal was discouraged. He had been gone for many years in his dream and finally he decided to return home. Sadly, he rode along the snow-covered road. As he came within sight of the castle, he saw all the lights ablaze, and he realized it was

Christmas Eve. There would be much feasting and joy that night inside the castle.

Sir Launfal rode up to the guard at the gate. To his dismay the guard did not recognize him. “No beggars are allowed inside the castle,” the guard said and drove the bedraggled knight away. Sir Launfal was dejected. He got stiffly off his horse and sat down in the shelter of the castle wall. He looked at the light streaming out of the windows. It was Christmas Eve, the night the Christ child was born and his search had been fruitless and now he was excluded even from his own home. Had even Christ rejected him? Finally the knight pulled this last crust of bread from his pocket. Just as he began to eat it, he noticed a beggar nearby. It was the same beggar he had seen at the gate many years ago as he was leaving on his quest. Sir Launfal broke his bread and gave half to the beggar. Then he went to the brook, broke the ice, and drew water for both of them to drink. As they ate together and drank from the old knight's wooden bowl, a strange thing happened: Sir Launfal suddenly thought the crust tasted like fresh bread and the water like the finest wine! He turned to the beggar, but the beggar was gone. In his place he saw the shining presence of Christ. Then he heard Christ saying:

*Not what we give, but what we share
for the gift without the giver is bare;
who gives himself with his alms feed three--
himself, his hungering neighbor, and me.*

Sir Launfal looked down at his wooden bowl. It was no longer his old wooden bowl. Instead, he held in his hand the Holy Grail. His search was over. With that the knight awoke from his sleep. It was morning. Sir Launfal believed Christ had spoken to him, and he knew what he must do.

“Put away my sword and armor,” he instructed the servants. “I am not going to distant countries to look for the Holy Grail. Because it is right here in my own castle.” From that day on Sir Launfal opened wide the gates of his castle to the poor and the hungry. He welcomed both the rich and poor alike and was friendly to all. In his castle all experienced the love and kindness of one who had supped with Christ.

One who had supped with Christ. That's us, you know. Those who have supped with Christ. That's us

every month, we are the ones who gather around the table to share a meal with Christ. We are the ones who have drunk from the Holy Grail, the cup of Christ. Does it make a difference to us? The parable of the rich man and Lazarus is a parable of warning, and it may be one that is hard to hear for those of us for whom the rest of the world considers to be very rich. What do you hear when you hear this parable? Does it make you uncomfortable because you are more like the rich man than you are like Sir Launfal? Or maybe you're uncomfortable talking about money, especially in church. But that's one place that maybe we should talk about it, because it is one of the most consistent themes in all of the Bible. Where are you with money? Is it your friend or your enemy? In the parable the rich man ends up on the bad side of the great divide, not because he had so much money, but because of how he treats a fellow human being. It is not his bank balance that is his problem, it is his indifference.

I don't know about you, but when I log on to the internet from my computer, across the task bar at the top are "frequently visited pages." These are the websites that I look at fairly often, so the program has them listed across the top so all I have to do is click on the tab to take me there rather than having to type in the whole www. Address. If you look at my tabs you'll see important websites like ESPN or Major League baseball, so I can get my sports scores; and the New York Times so I can get my fix of news and politics; and there's a site called Textweek that is a discussion of the weekly Bible text for preachers. And one of the most frequently visited sites for me is Fifth Third Bank. Because I log in at least once every day. Do you do that? I check the balance, I see what bills have come in, what charges have been applied, and so on. Jennifer Moland-Kovash, the pastor of All Saints Lutheran Church in Palatine, Illinois comments about this passage:

"What these scriptures remind us is that there's something bigger and even better to set our sights on than a growing account balance. There is another way to live, a way that reflects the gift of eternal life and give us hope beyond doubt, strength beyond despair. God has set forth a different way: a way of godliness and faith and endurance and love and gentleness. What would our lives look like if we worried as much about marking them with love or filling the world with faith as we did about our

money?”¹ What if I paid more attention to different websites? Or no websites at all. What if I took that time for prayer? Or reading the Bible? Or thinking not of how much have I saved this month but how much have I given away? When I look at the newspaper or watch CNN, do I look for what builds me up, or do I look for ways to build up another? Do I view the world through the eyes of cynicism or the eyes of love? Do I ever take a step out in faith? Or am I despairing? That's what Jeremiah might have been. His country was a mess. Jerusalem was being besieged by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Jeremiah himself was under arrest because he was so annoying to the king, always prophesying that the people were being punished for their unfaithfulness. But in the midst of all this destruction, Jeremiah arranges to buy a field. How crazy is that? Why buy a field of a country that is being conquered and the people being taken away? Why do that? Because it is a sign of faith. It is a step saying that it won't always be this way. It is saying that even though I might not be around to see it, that things will get better, because the future is not in my hands, or the hands of King Nebuchadnezzar, but in the hands of the Lord. (Niebuhr?) It is the opposite of indifference. Did you notice in the parable how indifferent he was to Lazarus? In life, he never even notices him, let alone speak to him or care about him. And even after death, he still speaks to Abraham, but not to Lazarus. “Abraham, send Lazarus to cool my tongue.” “Abraham, send Lazarus to warn my brothers.” Not once does it dawn on the rich man to speak to Lazarus directly as a fellow human being. The rich man operates on the assumption that Lazarus is beneath him. The rich man doesn't get it, even after death. Do we? Is indifference our sin? Not just to the poor, although I do hope you notice that in our scriptures today, but what about one another? The rich man doesn't even speak to Lazarus, instead he speak to Abraham. Can we become so indifferent to those around us that we stop even speaking to another person? Is our focus so on ourselves that we become blind to the situation of another? Are we so intent on telling our own story, arguing our case, that we stop wondering about another—I wonder where she's coming from? I'd like to hear his story. I'm interested in that other person. The salvation

1 Moland-Kovash, Jennifer. *The Christian Century*, Living the Word, September 14, 2016. p. 20

of the rich man does not come in the giving away his riches so he can be saved from torment. His salvation comes not from looking to Abraham, but in looking to Lazarus and saying, “Lazarus, my brother, forgive me.” It is compassion that can bridge the chasm between life and death. And it's greatest expression is the compassion that Christ shows for us. The cross can bridge any chasm that exists—between rich and poor, between black and white, between liberal and conservative, even between life and death.

This parable is a warning, not against being too rich, for money is not good or bad. But it is a warning about being indifferent, about not caring for another. Because in this parable we are not the rich man, and we are not Lazarus. We are the brothers back home. Did we get the message? And in the end this is not a parable about what happens after we die, it is a parable about how we should live, because when we begin to care and to share and to live our lives reflecting the love of Christ, we are already in the arms of God.