

“Opportunity Knocks”

Luke 16: 19-31

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No one encouraged Albert Schweitzer to go to medical school. After all, he was thirty years old and already had a Doctorate in Philosophy, an advanced degree in theology and had studied music under some of Europe's finest professionals. He was the world's leading expert on organ building, wrote the definitive biography on Bach and was working on his masterful work, The Quest of the Historical Jesus. So why did he do it? He wanted to go to the French Congo and open a hospital, which he did after eight years of studying tropical medicine and surgery.

What motivated Schweitzer to travel down this path? For years I have known about the article that he read in the *Paris Missionary Society's* publication indicating their urgent need for physicians in the French colony of Gabon. This plea for help grabbed his attention and heart. He could not get it off his mind and responded to that call for help.

Until last week, I was unaware of the other influence in his life that led him to make this decision. He heard a sermon based upon our text and it changed his life. Through the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, he realized that because he was so gifted and blessed, he had to go to medical school and then to Africa. What a role model and inspiration he has been because he did.

I wonder how many people have been influenced to make changes in their values and lifestyle because of this story. The number may surprise us. Perhaps this is why almost every religion has a similar story of messages brought from the dead to the living. It is a life-changing story that captures people's attention and hearts.

In Jesus' version of the story, a poor, sick beggar by the name of Lazarus sat outside a rich man's house each day, hoping to be noticed so he could receive some assistance. By the way, this is the only parable where Jesus gives a character a name. Why do you think he did this? Was it his way of showing that this beggar was a real person with needs and feelings common to all people? Perhaps. I have discovered when you put a face and a name with issues and decisions, it changes everything. Maybe Jesus felt the same way. So, Jesus called him Lazarus, the Greek form of the ancient name, Eleazar, which means, “God helps.” How interesting.

In spite of the fact that Lazarus sat at the gate outside the rich man's home, only passing dogs noticed him. I'm not sure if they comforted or humiliated Lazarus by licking his sores. What I am sure of is Lazarus' disappointment over his neighbor's insensitivity.

Both men eventually died and poor Lazarus was escorted to the bosom of Abraham, where it appeared he was the honored guest at a messianic banquet. In contrast, the rich man ended up suffering in the fires of Hades, the folkloric dwelling place of the dead. What a startling reversal of fortune, a theme commonly found in Luke's writings.

In his anguish, the rich man cried out to Father Abraham for relief, but his request was denied. To make matters worse, he was told that the chasm between him and Lazarus was too deep and wide to be breached. His condition was unalterably final.

Sensing it was too late for him, the rich man pleaded for Father Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers, lest they follow him. Again, his request was denied as he was reminded that his brothers had the Law of Moses and the prophets, just as he did. If they would listen to them, they would know how to be spared their brother's fate.

Did they listen? Jesus' version of this story does not tell us. Will we listen? This is the more important question, isn't it? Listen to what? **What is the point of this parable?**

Let me tell you what I don't think the point is. I don't think Jesus told this parable to satisfy our curiosity about life after death. Instead, I agree with Candler's Bandy Professor of Preaching and noted author, Dr. Tom Long, that the heart and soul of this parable is about the here and now. The purpose of

this parable is to emphasize the seriousness of life on this side of the grave and the importance of being a good neighbor.

Look at the context. Jesus was speaking to the religious leaders, whom he accused of being lovers of money, hoping they would come to their senses and use their wealth and influence to help their neighbors.

Likewise, Luke used this parable to help his readers understand that in a world of haves and have-nots, God always took the side of the have-nots. If they were going to be a part of what God was doing in the world and be faithful to the work to which they had been called, they, too, needed to become advocates of the poor and builders of a just world. The failure to seize this opportunity would break God's heart.

Dr. Long picks up on the lament that is central to understanding this parable. When the rich man asked for mercy, Abraham responded, "Son, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now, he is comforted here and you are in agony. Besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us" Luke 16: 25-26.

These are the words of a heartbroken parent. There is no joy or delight in Abraham's voice. He is in agony. Why? One of his own missed an opportunity to be a part of what God was doing in the world to help people who were suffering. Simply put, time ran out.

This theme of lost opportunity runs throughout Luke's gospel. When Jesus singled out Zacchaeus on the way to Jerusalem, the people around him were waiting for the Lord to "let him have it!" It appears that Zacchaeus was a heartless and cruel rich man that had stolen from every one of them. Finally, he was going to get what he deserved.

So what did Jesus do? He calmly told Zacchaeus to come down from that sycamore tree and take him to his home. Why? Jesus wanted to give him one more opportunity to change his values and priorities and be a part of what God was doing in the world. To the dismay of many, I'm confident, Zacchaeus took advantage of that opportunity.

"Look, Lord! Here and now I give half my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount" Luke 19:8.

When Jesus approached the Holy City on Palm Sunday riding on a donkey, what did he do? Luke is the only writer that tells us that he wept as he muttered these words, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace, but now it is hidden from your eyes" Luke 19:41-42. Missed opportunities are lying all over the floor in Luke's gospel, similar to the one in today's parable.

I don't want anyone here to miss the opportunity to be a part of what God is doing in the world. Like Abraham and Jesus, this would break my heart.

What is God doing? He is helping people who are struggling. Isn't this what Jesus did? He fed the hungry, healed the sick, welcomed the outcast, loved the unlovely, befriended the lonely, protected the poor, restored self-respect, instilled confidence, encouraged people to achieve their potential, spoke up for those who had no voice and forgave sinners. He made hope visible and he did it one person at a time along his journey. Helping people was not a distraction for him; it was his mission and he invited others to join him. This includes you and me.

How can I be a part of what God is doing in the world? Take an inventory of what you have and share it.

I am indebted to three of our members who wrote the study, *Klesis*, for teaching me that the difference between a talent and a spiritual gift is how it is used. Talents, skills, abilities and even resources can become spiritual gifts when used to meet others' needs. I become a part of what God is doing in the world when I respond to others' needs with what I have.

Look at the difference the rich man in our parable could have made in Lazarus' life. Look at the difference this would have made in the rich man's life. Why didn't he do it?

I get the impression from reading the opening scene of the drama that the rich man was the center of his universe. He certainly spared no expense dressing, feeding and taking care of himself. He wore

designer clothes, ate gourmet meals and lived in a spacious palace. It was apparent that life was all about him.

Lest you misunderstand, I don't think he was condemned because he was rich. He was judged harshly because he was heartless, selfish and indifferent. A man was sitting outside his gate that would have been pleased to have only the crumbs that fell from his plate, yet he received nothing. By the time the rich man got around to caring about others, beginning with his brothers, it was too late.

Windows of opportunity open and they also close. It is a sinking feeling when you realize a window has closed because you were busy, selfish or indifferent, isn't it? No one wins when this happens because missed opportunities lead to unmet needs.

What do you still have time to do? What can you do, alone and with others, to be a part of what God is doing in the world? What changes do you need to make to begin? Can this church help you do it?

In deacons' meeting last Sunday, Page Fulgham spoke to the women and men assembled. "When I retired," he said, "one of my goals was to be involved in missions. Smoke Rise has afforded me that opportunity. I have been to Honduras 9 times, Appalachia 15 times, Biloxi one time, downtown Atlanta to Park Avenue Baptist Church twice to help with renovations and have made over a dozen trips to Bryson City, North Carolina, building the Sabbath House. I love Smoke Rise for a lot of reasons, but the greatest is the involvement of the members in hands-on mission projects here and around the world that are making a difference in a lot of lives."

Would you join Page and many other members of this mission-minded church in being a good neighbor? Would you link arms with fellow church members to support this church's endeavors to be a good neighbor? Will you make a commitment to fund the ministries and programs of Smoke Rise that make a difference in the lives of many people? Will you bring your commitment card to the altar this morning, indicating your support of our 2010 Ministry Plan? I intend to do this and do so gladly. I can think of no better way to use my resources to impact the lives of people. It is a window of opportunity that I certainly do not want to miss.

Albert Schweitzer said that because he was so gifted and blessed, he had to build a hospital in the French Congo. What have you been blessed by God to do? Don't let the opportunity pass.

