

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
September 26, 2010
Luke 16:19-31

We get invited for a special international dinner: an experience of what people eat around the world. It sounds like fun. Our host says there will be some surprises involved. It is a dinner for 20 people. Each of the 20 people, as we enter, reaches into a basket and draws a place card, at random, which tells each of us where we will sit.

The three people who have drawn the place cards that say #1, #2, and #3 are called first and seated at a table with silverware and a tablecloth. There is a basket of rolls and butter, and the waiter fills their glasses with a choice of juice or soda. The waiter then brings over a tray with salads, and then pasta with meat sauce.

The MC begins to speak:

"If you are sitting over here, you represent the 15 percent of the world's population with a per capita income of \$12,000 or more per year. You are fortunate enough to be able to afford a nutritious daily diet. Since many of you exceed your daily requirement of calories, you are likely to face health problems. But most of you don't worry about getting health care. You have access to the best medical care in the world. It's a given that your children will attend school; the only uncertainty is how many years they will study after high school. Access to credit? You turn down more offers than you can count. You and your family live in a comfortable and secure home. You probably own at least one car and two televisions. When you take your annual vacation, you don't worry about your job disappearing in your absence. You have access to virtually everything you need and the security to enjoy it."

The MC next speaks to the people who have drawn place cards #4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10. The seven people come forward but there is no table for them, only chairs. The MC begins to speak to the second group.

"If you are sitting here, you represent roughly 35 percent of the world's population. You earn between \$1,000 and \$2,000 a year. The levels of access and security you enjoy vary greatly. You live on the edge. For many, it would take losing only one harvest to drought or a serious illness to throw you into poverty. You probably own no land and may work as a day laborer, a job that pays a paltry amount—but it's better than nothing. Your small income allows for some use of electricity and a few years of schooling for your children—especially if they are boys. Alternatively, you may have left your family to go work in the city. You hope that the money you earn from your less-than-minimum-wage job as domestic help or a sweatshop worker will eventually allow you to move back home and make a better life for your family."

The MC tells the seven people in this group that they can go over to the counter and get a plate of rice and beans, and a cup of water.

The MC calls for #11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20: the remaining ten people. He tells them they can sit on the floor. He begins to speak.

“If you are sitting on the floor, you represent the majority of the world’s population—roughly 50 percent. Your average income is less than \$1000 a year – about \$2.70 a day —although many of you earn much less. Every day is a struggle to meet your family’s basic needs. Finding food, water, and shelter can consume your entire day. For many of you women, it would not be uncommon to have to walk five to 10 miles every day to get water, spend several more hours working in the fields, and of course, take care of the children. Many of you are frequently hungry. It is quite likely that you don’t get the minimum number of calories your hardworking life requires. Many of you are homeless or living in structures so flimsy that a hard rain or strong wind could cause a major catastrophe. Even though education is the single most powerful weapon against poverty, school is a luxury few of your children will ever experience. Most girls don’t even bother to dream about school. Adequate health care is out of the question. For most of you, early death is all too familiar, with many mothers expecting to lose one or two children before they turn five. If you are lucky enough to work, you are probably a tenant farmer who must give your landowner 75 percent of your harvest. Or you may get occasional work as a day laborer at a large plantation growing bananas, sugar, or coffee for export. You reap few benefits from these crops; you’d prefer to grow food your children could eat.”

You can go to the edge of the room, where there are ten plates which contain three quarters of a cup of rice, or less. There are ten cups of water. Some of the cups have water that is clean.

The MC tells all twenty people to begin eating. Bon appetit!

When Jesus tells the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, we may not think of ourselves as a rich person. All of us, myself included, complain about having too many expenses and not enough money. Each of us thinks of “rich people” as “people who have more money than I do.” So each of us thinks, “I’m not a rich person.” But if you asked the rest of the world’s population if you are a rich person, how many of them would tell you that you’re not rich?

We read this parable, and we wonder, “How could the rich man be so lacking in compassion for the suffering of Lazarus?” Part of the answer lies in Jesus’ words that Lazarus is “outside the gate.” Out of sight, out of mind.

The dinner experience I described is an experience called the “Hunger Banquet” designed by Oxfam International. (The quotations from the MC and the description of the event come from the Hunger Banquet Toolkit at actfast.oxfamamerica.org.) It can be carried out in churches and a variety of other settings. One of the effects of it is to remind us of the lives of people outside the gate.

When I began reading about it, I expected there would be four groups rather than three. I expected that after the group that had a bowl of rice, there would be a fourth group that had nothing to eat. I wondered why that group was not represented in

Oxfam's simulation. Was it because it would be too complicated if there were more than three groups? But the real answer, which seems so obvious now, took a long time to emerge into my conscious mind. The previous day, I had been flipping through a magazine from Heifer International and happened to come across a statistic they quoted from the World Food Programme: 10.9 million children under age 5 die in developing countries each year: malnutrition and hunger-related diseases cause 60 percent of the deaths. The fourth group is not at the dinner for a very simple reason: they are dead.

Certainly the causes of inequality are complex and the solutions we have aren't perfect. But could I, by writing a check, save the life one of those malnourished kids? Could I spare another mother from the experience of watching her toddler slowly die in her arms? Could I save two of those malnourished children? Could I save three? And if I could save one of the people who is suffering outside the gate, like Lazarus, who longs to satisfy his hunger with the crumbs that fall from the rich person's table, is that worth the sacrifice of some of my income?

At first, the hungry people seem so distant. But every year, I go to Diocesan Annual Council, along with a lay delegate from our parish, and we hear about amazing things that the Diocese of Virginia is doing to help those who suffer from hunger and poverty in Haiti, and Liberia, and the Sudan, and Tanzania, and the Dominican Republic. And every year, the leaders of those amazing programs say "You tell us it's important for the Church to feed the hungry, and we are, but it takes money." The diocese's money comes from parishes, and the parishes' money comes from parishioners. And every year, we look at the Diocese's very stretched budget and see that the Church's feeding the hungry relies on money you put in the offering plate. The Church's feeding the hungry is based on what you decide to write on the pledge card. Do you think it's important for the Church to feed the hungry? You are the Church. It is based on what you give or don't give. The same is true for the amazing work on hunger and poverty that is done by the national Episcopal Church. Also, Episcopal Public Policy Network does excellent work in focusing on correcting the injustice that causes gross inequality and dire poverty. The Episcopal Church Women do amazing things to feed the hungry. So does Episcopal Relief and Development. The ways to feed Lazarus are close to hand. All it takes is our own willingness.

And that willingness to give money is a spiritual issue. We are used to thinking of our spirituality as a private matter, something just between our soul and God. But when Jesus talks here about what happens to the soul, it is not a private matter; Jesus talks about the rich man in relation to a member of the public: the poor man outside the gate. When we think of sin, we normally think of things we have done. We figure if we haven't done anything particularly horrible, we're pretty okay. Right?

This man in the parable is generous to his friends, and invites them over for some dinner parties. He figures if he hasn't done anything particularly horrible, he's pretty okay. Right? But what about Lazarus, lying outside the gate, covered with sores, longing to satisfy his hunger from the crumbs that fall from the rich man's table?

If I sit at my table and eat my pasta with meat sauce without bothering anybody, I'm pretty okay. Right? And if there's someone sitting on the floor eating half a cup of rice and a cup of unsafe water who dies of malnutrition while I eat my dinner? Well, that isn't really my fault. Right? Because I thought that not hurting anybody was enough.

Or is Judgment Day the day I look into the eyes of each of the people whose suffering I could have relieved, but didn't. Is Judgment Day the day I look into the eyes of the mother whose toddler's death I could have prevented by writing a check, but didn't. Is Judgment Day the day that I plead for a chance to go back, to do it over again, to get it right?

Every Sunday, in the silence right before the prayer of confession, each of us has a chance to look back over the week and confess any particular sins we remember, and that is a valuable thing to do. But during that silence, it is important to keep in mind that we have sinned by what we have done, and by what we have left **UNDONE**. Even when we run out of remembered sins to confess during that silence, there are the things left undone, the checks not written. The rich man in today's gospel winds up in Hell not because of something he has done; he winds up in Hell because of what he has left undone.

You know that I almost never preach about Hell. I've preached almost 100 sermons at St. Stephen's, and I think none of them have been about Hell. But today's gospel is a place where Jesus preaches about Hell. In this parable, Jesus teaches that what happens after death is directly related to what we have done with our money, or to

put it more precisely, what we have left undone with our money. And for me, the part of the parable I feel most keenly is the part in which the rich man pleads to have Lazarus go to his brothers and warn them so that they do not end up in the place of torment. It is too late for him, but he feels the urgent desire to tell the brothers he loves to give their money generously. Now that he has looked into the eyes of Lazarus, whose suffering he could have relieved by generosity with his money, he desperately wants to tell them what he has seen, to tell them to be generous with their money. Who are the brothers he wants so desperately to tell this message to? We are.

None of us here this morning is dead. That's a good thing for a variety of reasons, one of which is that I like you folks and I'm glad you're going to be here for a while longer. But the other nice thing about not being dead is that we get another chance to be generous. We get another chance to write a check. We get another chance to relieve someone's suffering. We get another chance to save someone's life. We get another chance to go to the dinner, and this time when we sit at the table with plenty of food, we get to share it with someone who needs it. Not just in a simulation, in reality. Jesus tells us it is the chance of a lifetime.