



Only Love



A Sermon By
The Rev. Andrew W. Walter

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Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

An audio version of this sermon can be found on the Grace Church website at:
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/2016-09-25-AWW.mp3>.

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Luke 16:19-31

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The Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost
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Jesus said, "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linens, and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate, lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table."

Luke 16:19-21

In the background of today's Gospel story, Jesus and the disciples were travelling from Galilee to Jerusalem, and as they made their way along, Jesus was teaching, just like he always did, about what it meant to be one of his followers, about what the Kingdom of God would look like on earth as it is in heaven. While many people flocked to Jesus' message, his words angered the Jewish leaders and authorities. They believed the core of the Jewish faith was their tradition, especially living in accordance with the Law, following all the rules, of which there were hundreds, right down to the tiniest little detail, with no one rule more important than another.

But, for Jesus, the Jewish leaders had it wrong. They couldn't see the big picture and were missing the forest for all the trees. Following every letter of the Law was not nearly as important as living by the spirit of the Law, which Jesus summed up as: *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.* What mattered to Jesus, what he felt was truly important, was how you treated other people.

To make this point, Jesus told a story about two men. One was a rich man who had a really nice life, with a good house, good clothes, and plenty of food to eat, and the other was a poor man named, Lazarus, for whom life was a constant struggle, a daily battle for survival.

Day after day, the rich man lived inside his gates, completely walled off from Lazarus. The rich man lived on one side, and Lazarus lived on the other. The rich man did not see Lazarus or speak to Lazarus. Coming and going from his house, the rich man would look right past Lazarus, or right through him, as if he wasn't there, as if he were invisible, as if he didn't matter. There was no interaction between the two men, and what is worse, the rich man didn't seem to care. He had no compassion, no empathy, no understanding of what Lazarus was confronting. The rich man did not love his neighbor as himself.

Listening to this first part of Jesus' story, it would be easy for us to brush it aside. After all, we get the point Jesus was trying to make. We realize what the rich man was doing was wrong. We know we should care for those around us, particularly those who are struggling with life. Whether we are Christian or not, a person of faith or not, showing a little sympathy, and mercy and kindness is the decent, human thing to do. So, we would never ignore someone in need who lived so close to us. We would never be blind to their struggles and pain. We would never walk right past them, as if they weren't there, as if they didn't matter...

Or, would we?

My wife and I live in one of the high-rise apartment buildings in downtown Silver Spring. It is a pretty new building, and comes with a wide range of amenities. There are two gyms, each equipped with treadmills, weights and televisions mounted on the walls. There are common rooms for meetings or lounging around, one even has a bar and a pool table. And, best of all, on the roof of our building, is a really nice swimming pool, open from Memorial Day to Labor Day, which comes in handy if you are on sabbatical all summer.

With all of these amenities, and its proximity to the Metro, our building is very popular. There are 457 apartments in the building, with over 600 residents, people I see every day, as I go to walk the dog, step outside to the convenience store, or head on over to Giant. 600 people, living right outside my door. And, I know 4 of them by name.

All of us have a Lazarus lying just outside our gate: someone to whom we do not pay as much attention as we should; someone with whom we are impatient or indifferent; someone to whom we should show more care but don't. It may be an old friend, or a family member. A child or a spouse. Maybe a neighbor, a coworker, or others in our community. They are right there, not too far away, but we have walled ourselves off from them, from their needs, their concerns, their perspectives. We go on with our lives, as if everything is fine, while they continue to struggle every single day, barely getting by, not living the kind of life God intends for them.

If we reflect on our lives, we know this to be true, and looking around, we can see it in our society and culture, as well. We live in a deeply divided country. We are divided over many different issues, but we are particularly divided by race. Read the newspaper, turn on the television, and you can see the chasm which exists. This past week, a state of emergency was declared in Charlotte, NC after the fatal police shooting of a black man triggered violent protests that left another man critically injured, and in Tulsa, OK, another police officer was charged with manslaughter in the deadly shooting of Terence Crutcher, an unarmed black man. These shootings are just part of an ongoing history of violence against African-Americans in this country, and yet, too many white people remain silent and indifferent.

We get more upset when Colin Kaepernick, the quarterback for the San Francisco 49'ers, remains seated during the national anthem in protest to what he sees as the mistreatment of African-Americans, than we do over the incidents that sparked his protest, in the first place. We watch the outcries and demonstrations over shooting after shooting and say, "Stop. Obey the law. Follow the rules. Let the justice system work." But, those words only mean something when the system works for you, when you come from a place of power and privilege. Those words only mean something, when you come from a place like the rich man in Jesus' story.

When the rich man died, much to his dismay, he suddenly found himself in Hades, from where he could look up and see Abraham far away, with the poor man, Lazarus, by his side. It was only then the rich man noticed the great chasm between himself and Lazarus, and we can almost hear the rich man crying out: "What the heck is going on? How did I get here? This isn't fair! I didn't do anything!"

And, that is the point Jesus was really trying to make: the rich man didn't do anything. The rich man went on with his life, believing everything was fine, oblivious to what was happening right at his door step, unaware of what Lazarus was going through, and when we live our lives that way, separating ourselves from other people, we ultimately separate ourselves from God and we end up in hell.

As Episcopalians, we don't hear very much about hell. It is not a subject we talk about, though people do occasionally ask me about it, and I have to say – I do think hell exists. It is not some place where really bad people go, an eternal furnace with flames all around. Instead, hell is a state of being. As Dostoyevsky wrote, it is the suffering of being unable to love.¹ It is life all on our own, walled off from other people, and most of all, walled off from God. It is the ultimate separation, and we get there by living like the rich man, by not listening to what other people are saying, not hearing their perspective, not understanding where they are coming from. We get there, when we don't love our neighbors as ourselves.

Jesus shows us there is another way to be. It is the way of empathy, and compassion and love. It is seeing life through someone else's eyes, walking in their shoes, trying to understand what they are going through. It is listening to what another person is saying, really listening, to their perspective and their experience. It is being open to what you might hear, being open to what you might learn, being open to change, because that is the way, the only way, that leads to new life.

¹ Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

In this year of *Sharing Grace*, we want to commit ourselves to following this way of Jesus, by sharing God's grace with those around us and loving our neighbor as ourselves, and right now, I want to give you two practical ways you can do this:

First, we cannot love our neighbor as ourselves, if we don't even know our neighbors, if we don't know the person living right outside our door, so over the next week, introduce yourself to someone you see every day but whose name you don't know. It might be someone right here at church, or someone in your apartment building, or neighborhood, or at work. Just go right up and say, "I've seen you around; but, I don't know your name; and, I want to introduce myself."

Second, here at Grace, we have begun having a series of conversations about racial injustice in this country, and I invite you to participate. Racism is a sin that affects us all. It needs to be addressed, and I strongly believe God is calling us, Grace Church, to this work. If we cannot discuss issues of race in this community, where we so greatly cherish our diversity, than there is little hope of having a wider conversation out there in the world. Our next discussion will take place today, immediately following the (10:30) service, and then there will be another one this coming Thursday at 6:00 pm. Both meetings will take place in the Rose Room, located through this door and to the right. If you want to participate but neither of these times work for you, please email and let me know. I will make sure you can be part of the conversation.

Only love can overcome the indifference, and apathy and hate in this world. Only love can break down the walls that divide us. Only love can bridge the chasms that separate us. Only love can bring the kingdom of God a little closer, and that is why, love will prevail.

Amen.