

# SERMON STARTER

CONNECTING IN RIGHT  
RELATIONSHIP



## HUMAN RELATIONS DAY



Open Hearts. Open Minds. Open Doors.

**The people of The United Methodist Church®**



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In today's Gospel reading, Jesus tells a parable, not only about money or the afterlife, but also about seeing the humanity of our neighbor.

Jesus tells the story of a rich man and a poor man. We don't know the rich man's name, but we know that he wears fine clothing and eats extravagant meals "every day," presumably even on the Sabbath.

The poor man, Lazarus, lies at the gate of the rich man's home every day. He sees, hears and smells the extravagant meals, yearning to have even some of the scraps. But the only comfort he has is from the street dogs who lick his wounds.

**LAZARUS IS HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT. IT BECOMES SO NORMAL TO SEE HIM THAT HE JUST BECOMES PART OF THE LANDSCAPE.**

19 "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. 20 And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, 21 who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. 22 The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. [a] The rich man also died and was buried. 23 In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side.[b] 24 He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.' 25 But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in

like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. 26 Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.' 27 He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house— 28 for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.' 29 Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.' 30 He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' 31 He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"

**Luke 16:19-31**

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What are the horrors that have become so normalized in our own culture that they fail to elicit an appropriate amount of compassion and action for those who suffer? What injustice has become so normalized that it fails to evoke enough outrage to fix a broken system?

In this parable, the rich man ignores Lazarus, but the dogs bring Lazarus comfort. Over time, both men die. The rich man is in torment, and Lazarus, as we heard, is in the lap of Abraham.

The rich man cries out to Abraham, still not to Lazarus. He calls out from his position of privilege, using the term “Father” to make a connection to Abraham as a religious elite. “I’m one of yours,” he codes to Abraham.

The rich man is still so self-absorbed that he asks Abraham to tell Lazarus to serve him and bring him comfort. The audacity! The arrogance is almost too much to fathom. The rich man’s sense of entitlement gets in the way of recognizing why he is in so much pain. You almost feel sorry for him. His inability to see “the other” has grown in a way that not only harms others but also restricts him from the very grace that would alleviate his suffering.

This is the chasm that Jesus is talking about in

his story. Abraham says that those who wish to cross from here to there cannot do so.

**IT’S NOT THAT ONE IS RICH AND ONE IS POOR. IT IS THE REFUSAL TO SEE THE HUMANITY OF LAZARUS THAT CREATES THIS GREAT DIVIDE.**

The more we ignore our neighbors in need and don’t reach out to support them, the more we remove ourselves from experiencing divine grace.

The rich man, in his agony, wants to warn his five brothers to change their ways so that they can be saved. But, again, he is missing the point. Rather than reaching out to all people as part of the family of God, the rich man cannot see beyond the needs of his immediate family. Abraham reminds him that they have all of the prophets, Moses and the Scriptures. Everything they need for salvation is already available to them.

Where does that leave us, friends? As we gather here, I see in this parable a message of good news for us through Abraham’s words to the rich man.

Among all of us gathered here, we have the wisdom found as followers of Jesus Christ. The authority of divine love points us to right relationship with our neighbors, to right relationship with the Lazaruses of the world.

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## IN THIS STORY OF ABRAHAM, LAZARUS, THE RICH MAN AND HIS FIVE SIBLINGS, WHERE WOULD YOU SAY WE ARE REPRESENTED?

I would say that we are the siblings of the rich man. We are the ones who are given the second chance. Amid all that is challenging and ugly, we can work in partnership with each other and with God to be the change we want to see in the world. We can model with integrity the embodiment of love, peace and hope through Jesus Christ.

One of the beautiful turns of this parable is not that we should help “those poor, lonely people over there on the margins” in a paternalistic and self-congratulatory way. Instead, we are to practice recognizing the connected humanity of our neighbor and building real and lasting relationships of mutuality and respect.

This weekend, we remember the life, ministry and prophetic voice of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., who wrote that we are, “caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” (*Letter from a Birmingham Jail*)

**EVERY ONE OF US IS OF SACRED WORTH.**

We are all family. When we walk past our neighbor who is hiding in plain sight like Lazarus, we not only participate in sin, but we also limit the gifts and graces that our sisters and brothers in Christ bring to the table. We limit the experiences, the voices and the beloved community that take place through mutual sharing of gifts.

**SOMETIMES, WE MAY FEEL LIKE LAZARUS AT THE GATE, LONELY AND HUNGRY.** More often, I think, we are like the rich man, absorbed in our lives, our work, our family and our friends *but unwilling to notice our neighbors in the margins.*

Today we have an opportunity to live into the potential of the rich man’s family through our Human Relations Day offering. With this offering, we join with United Methodists around the world, remembering that the size of the table of divine love is unlimited.

**THROUGH OUR GIFTS, MAY WE CATCH A GLIMPSE OF THE SPIRIT OF BELOVED COMMUNITY, LIVED OUT IN THE LIVES OF OUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN CHRIST. AMEN.**