

Covenant Word

Brothers and Sisters of Dives

Amos 6:1a, 4-7; I Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31

*A Message by
The Reverend Sarah
Jackson Shelton
Pastor
Sunday
September 30, 2007*

**Dear Friends,
Thank you for wanting
to read and study these
thoughts more
carefully. Please know
that I do not take full
credit for anything that
may be contained
within, because I may
have read or heard
something at some point
during my pilgrimage
and do not remember
its source and thus,
cannot give the rightful
author his/her credit. I
pray that you will find
inspiration and
encouragement.
Sarah Shelton**



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Covenant*

Where Faith Comes to Life.

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Worship with us each Sunday
morning at 9 a.m. and
for Bible study at 10:30 a.m.

Fresh out of seminary, I arrived at Brookwood Baptist Church ready to take on the tasks of ministry. Being their Youth and Children's Minister, my summers were packed with day camps, mission trips, and beach retreats. The last event of each summer was to take the fourth through sixth graders to Hargis Christian Retreat for a week long camp. We did the normal things that happen at camp. We hiked, boated, sang, made crafts, performed skits and had daily Bible study. On the last night, if the weather permitted, we would walk a dark path to the center of the woods and have a bonfire. Once there, we would roast marshmallows and tell stories.

Still to this day, I don't know how the idea possessed me that this bonfire needed some enlivenment. As I look back on it, it was a bad idea from the very beginning. It got stuck in my head, however, and so I pursued it. Maybe it was my inexperience... maybe it was my desire to be a "cool youth minister"... maybe it was because I did not have children of my own... whatever the reason, before we even left for camp, I took one of the older youth of the church aside. He was a nice young man named Dennis. I talked with him about my idea which was: once we got to the camp fire, he was to jump out and scare us. We would all scream! Then we would realize that it was only Dennis, laugh and enjoy the campfire. What I had not counted into my equation was Dennis' flair for the dramatic.

We had had a nice week at camp. It was a great mix of children like Marion Norris' grandchildren and the Hogewood and Duffy children. We had not had one minute's trouble all week. The night of the campfire arrived. We sprayed ourselves with bug spray, checked the batteries in our flashlights, collected all the children and walked through the

dark woods. There was an unusual amount of twig breaking of which the children took notice. Their imaginations needed little encouragement, so their flashlights often left the path to see what might be following us in the surrounding, sinister darkness. We settled ourselves around the fire, pulled out the marshmallows, a few stories were told, and then, almost as if on cue, out jumped Dennis to scare us all. Dennis, however, did not reveal his identity as we had previously discussed. Instead, he grabbed one of the teenage girl counselors and dragged her back into the dark woods screaming. The children, as you might imagine, became hysterical. They cried! They clung! They clawed! Someone kept saying, "Let's just get back to the cabin where we will be safe." It was a mess!

Finally, we got all of the children safely to the cabin. It was filled with light and just the sight of our home away from home began to calm everyone down. But just as we were feeling safe... just as we were wiping the last tear, out came Dennis for one more round of scaring. This time, however, he did finally take his mask off to reveal his identity. But the damage had been done. Bunk beds were pushed together, and every counselor slept with children in their beds that last night of camp.

When I read today's parable, ... I wonder if He is trying to scare us into Heaven by giving us a preview of Hell. For in the story, there are the fires of Hell, agony, torment, begging for just a fingertip of water for relief. Is Jesus trying to literally scare us to death?

Let's just suffice it to say that this experience "did not win friends and influence people." However, if I had only been a

fundamentalist, I could have scared all of those sweet little souls right into Heaven by giving an altar call about the demons of Hell! And I believe that we would have had a 100% response rate that night.

When I read today's parable, I wonder if that is what Jesus is attempting to do. I wonder if He is trying to scare us into Heaven by giving us a preview of Hell. For in the story, there are the fires of Hell, agony, torment, begging for just a fingertip of water for relief. Is Jesus trying to literally scare us to death?

The context of the parable is that the Pharisees, lovers of money, were listening to Jesus teach, and they were scoffing him. Jesus, also not in the habit of winning friends and influencing people in high places, quickly assures the Pharisees that God knows their hearts and that the things they hold in high regard are detestable in the sight of God. He continues by telling the parable from the gospel reading.

(Exegesis is taken from Paul Duke's "A Rich Man

Clothed in Purple,” The Parables) The story is full of extreme contrasts. First there is pleasure with the sight of gorgeous purple garments, the feel of fine linen against the skin, the delights of merry feasting every day, the ethereal lifting by angels, the warmth of being besides Abraham and the satisfying cool waters of paradise. Right next to the pleasure, however, there is the pain of rank hunger, the ache of bones on pavement, the puss oozing from open sores, public exposure and neglect, the agony of flames, the cry of thirst and the yelp for mercy.

Each man in the story provides a dense grid of contrasts as well. One is incredibly rich; the other is desperately poor. One is covered in purple linen; the other is covered in sores. One man is named Lazarus; the other has everything but a name. One is buried in a traditional manner but the other, also dead, has no description of a burial. One is described as being lifted and carried to Abraham’s side by the angels. There is no mention of the other’s soul being attended to by anyone.

One of the men, Lazarus, does not act for himself. He doesn’t have to because he is always acted upon. He is left at someone’s gate, sores cover him, dogs abuse him, angels carry him, and Abraham comforts and defends him. He never says a word or is spoken to directly. The rich man, however, has plenty to say and is a whirl of activity by the verbs ascribed to him. He, after all, possesses the power in this story.

The parable is also rich in reversals. The man formerly draped in luxuriance is now wrapped about by flames. His once-sated appetite is reduced to craving water dropped from another’s fingertip. The man he had ignored is now the man to whom he cries for help. Having refused the beggar, he is now the beggar refused.

For Lazarus, all of the reversals are happy. The slobbering dogs are replaced by angels. The erstwhile nobody sprawled in a gutter starving, while the sounds of elegant dining surround him, is not only transported to Paradise, but he holds there the highest place of honor. He is seated beside Abraham himself at the final feast.

Even the gate, outside of which Lazarus begs, is transformed into a great chasm. No longer the symbol of a way to open or shut the door on the possibilities of redemption, it is replaced by a ditch so vast that there is nothing that could bridge its gaping jaws.

A cursory reading of the parable suggests that faith in Christ is required to avoid eternal torment and gain heaven’s bliss. It is easy to come away with fear over the judgment that is possible after we die. It reinforces what we like to believe: that good guys will win in the end and bad guys will get what they deserve. Believers will be rewarded; nonbelievers will be punished. (Robert McClelland, “Taking Life Seriously,” Best Sermons vl. 7)

A closer reading of the parable, however, suggests another unsettling lesson. For instance, faith in Christ has nothing to do with the eternal rewards or punishments that either of these men are left to endure. Their destiny is determined by the attitudes they have had towards each other in their earthly lives.

A closer reading of the parable, however, suggests another unsettling lesson. For instance, faith in Christ has nothing to do with the eternal rewards or punishments that either of these men are left to endure. Their destiny is determined by the attitudes they have had towards each other in their earthly lives. The rich man walked past Lazarus every day, but he had no compassion for him. Lazarus’ needs were obvious, but the rich man felt no sense of obligation in meeting them. The rich man so ignored Lazarus that his needs were as invisible as he. It was not the rich man’s lack of faith in Christ that was his problem; it was his lack of regard for Lazarus, his neighbor. (McClelland)

The parable is pretty clear that Jesus wants us to live wisely, responsibly, and charitably in this world. Topping God’s list is this matter of human suffering and our response to it. It is not a matter about which we can afford to be indifferent. Rather, God’s concern is for us to take on the well-being of others. It is so significant an act that it follows us through life, to the grave and beyond. In this parable, God is less concerned with our sinful bumps and warts than God is concerned with how we meet the needs of those around us.

We do not have to be actively evil to miss resting in the bosom of Abraham; we need only be indifferent to our neighbor. We do not have to kick the person who is down; only step over and around him. (McClelland)

We do not have to grossed out by the sores that cover his body; we need not see him at all.

The bottom line is our faith should not scare us to death, but our relationship to others should. There is no talk here of faith affecting our eternal status, but there is plenty of support that the way we treat our neighbor, or NOT, will determine our eternal resting place.

There is a woman who lives in Southtown who stops by occasionally to eat Wednesday night supper with us or to see if we have any McDonald’s coupons. We do not know her name because she usually tells us a different one every time she comes by. Often in her pajamas and slippers, my favorite times to watch her are when she dances on the lawns of Johns Ridouts. This usually happens early in the morning and with such abandon that I can see her from my office desk. It isn’t, however, so much what she does as it is the obvious relief she feels at that particular moment from the demons that possess and taunt her on what seem to be a regular basis.

In this parable, God is less concerned with our sinful bumps and warts than God is concerned with how we meet the needs of those around us.

One morning, I was at Lucie’s, just down the street, enjoying some tea. The place was unusually crowded, so I was sitting near the door with my nose in a book. I recognized her voice before I even looked up. “I want a biscuit and a cup of coffee,”

she told the man behind the register. I looked up and watched. He was new and had that “deer caught in the headlights” look about him. I suspect that he wasn’t quite sure what to do, as he told her how much her bill was and waited for her to pay. When she made no movement to pay, he finally put the food into her hands without demanding the money. Maybe he was thinking the tip jar had enough in it to cover the tab.

About that time, she turned to leave and caught me watching. Like we were old friends, she said, “Well, hey! You studyin’ you a book?” “Yes,” I replied. “I am trying to study. I hope you are doing well.” “Oh yes, I am.” And she was out the door with her food.

The chatter at Lucie’s continued right on. There was no recognition that for a few brief seconds a chasm had been bridged. Similar to the cartoons where a lasso is used to bring together two huge land masses, I felt like we had had a rare connection and been brought together.

I liked the way it felt, so I stood and went to the counter. “How much was her biscuit and coffee?” It really didn’t matter, because I pulled out \$20 and told the man to keep the change handy. “She will be back again,” I knowingly told him.

Now I recognize that compared to the magnitude of this woman’s needs and issues, not to mention the grand scale of poverty in our world that my encounter at Lucie’s that morning does not even register on the screen as a blip towards effective help or resolution. But it was something in that for a few brief moments we were neighbors in a community that shared what we could with one another.

The rich man finally begs, from the depths of hell, that his 5 brothers, who are still alive, be sent word that they must change their ways or suffer the same consequence as he. He asks for a ghost, someone who has been raised from the dead, to be dispatched to take the message. Abraham refuses, knowing that even the resurrected could not give instruction to those who are already sufficiently inoculated against the affront of scripture.

My friends, we are these brothers and sisters. We have the scriptures for clear instruction and we have a resurrected Lord, a ghost from the grave, who clearly tells us that God is more concerned about the risks we take to care about others than our own shortcomings; that God is more concerned about the opportunities we take to love others than our sin; that God is more concerned about the time we took to fulfill someone else’s need while we walked away from satisfying our own.

The last time I checked, a literal Lazarus was not at the doorstep of my house, nor is he probably waiting at yours...but someone is!

Someone who longs to be seen and recognized and given chances and they are looking to us to, at least, share a scrap from our sumptuous table. It will take courage. It will take conviction. It will involve risk. But God is watching hopefully to see how we will respond. And if that doesn’t scare us to death, I do not know what will.

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Let us pray:
O Lord, Our God,
We long to do the right thing for the right reasons. We do not want to be motivated by fear but by a love that is akin to Your love. So create clean hearts within us. Put a right spirit within us, so that we might love one another.

<Choir to sing “Create in Me a Clean Heart”>

Perhaps there are those among us who are ready to create within a clean heart by hearing the good news that Jesus Christ has died for them. Perhaps there is one who has come to realization that they no longer want to step over those who wait at their gate and, instead, want to re-dedicate themselves to the care of the poor, needy, and the disenfranchised. Whatever your decision of faith, we invite you to make it as we stand and sing, hymn #611, “Let Your Heart be Broken.”