

THE MESSAGE for Jan 9, 2011**Luke 16:19-31*****The Wide and Gaping Landfill*****The Rev. Dr. R. K. Miller**

This past week I went to the hospital to visit a young woman in her mid 30's who suffers from a number of chronic diseases. She was in the Hershey Hospital on New Years day only to be sent home misdiagnosed and told that the pain in her side was displaced pain associated with her Fibromyalgia. They gave her a prescription and sent her home. She went home, started taking the prescription, and the pain got worse. She went to her doctor and he immediately sent her to the Ephrata Hospital and did surgery. It was a good thing he did. She was "a mess inside," he told her. She was finally getting relief.

Her mom, dad, and sister were at the hospital when I arrived; so when the nurse came in attended to the patient I entertained a conversation with her father, Frank (not his real name). Of course, we talked about the usual stuff; the state of the union and politics, the church, the government, the economy, the good, the bad, and the ugly. We also talked about how truly blessed we are in spite of ourselves. Then the conversation turned to how we tend to make matters worse. We tend to be our worst enemy at times. We talked about how our decisions and our actions can help or hinder those around us. Frank said, "Each one of us can make a difference in the world for the better."

"For example," he said. "My wife and I were at the pharmacy getting our daughter's prescription filled the other day. Standing in front of us was 27-year-old holding his daughter of 14 months. She was obviously sick and had been since the day she was born. You would have thought she was only 6 months old for all the bigger she was. The baby's mother was working. The father was a stay at home dad. When the prescription was ready the clerk informed him that it would be \$4.00. He didn't have \$4.00. He said to the clerk, 'we have insurance, doesn't that cover it?' The clerk said there is a \$4.00 co-pay. The young man just stood there and began to cry. His daughter needed the prescription but he didn't have the money. He didn't have *any* money." Frank continued by telling me, "I handed the young man a \$20.00 bill and said. 'Here you go. Keep the change.'" Before Frank and his wife left the pharmacy he said that young man thanked them at least a half a dozen times. Talk about a relief effort for a young father and his daughter.

This past Friday I was shoveling the snow in our driveway with my children. Okay, they were playing. I was shoveling. Wasn't it great to see a couple of inches of snow this week? How is it that snow tends to bring out the kid in many of us? Anyway, after we finished shoveling the driveway we went in the house for breakfast. Simon got on the bus and went to school. Amber went to work. Thea was getting ready for school. So I decided to go shovel our neighbor's driveway. I was thinking about Frank's words, "Each one of us can make a difference in the world for the better."

So I went to make a difference for my neighbors. I was just about finished clearing our elderly neighbor's driveway when the door opened at our house. Little miss Thea yelled out to me from across the street – as only a five year-old can – “Hey dad, what the heck are you doing?” I yelled back, “I’ll explain when I get home. I’m just about finished.”

It was a teaching moment when I got home. I explained to our daughter that I wanted to do something nice for our older neighbors who may have a tough time cleaning the snow from their driveway. I said, “Nice people do nice things for others.” “Oh!” she said, “That was nice of you.”

Can you imagine the relief our elderly neighbor felt when he opened his garage door to find that his driveway had already been shoveled?

What the heck are you doing? That’s a great question for us to ponder...

I believe we want to make this world a better place.

I believe we want our lives to count for something good.

I believe we want to be nice to our neighbors.

I believe we want to be part of the relief effort that Jesus came and started.

I believe our mission, our vision, and our values ought to be focused on the needs of others because when we serve others our needs get met. It’s an amazing thing. It’s an awesome strategy. It’s the Jesus’ way. He started it and he empowers us to continue it. It begins with a service mentality, not a serve-us mentality. And yet, for so many people they have a tough time understanding why we do what we do as disciples of Jesus.

In our reading from Luke 16 we find the ultimate relief effort that’s waiting to happen. This is a story of contrasts – two men; one very rich and one very poor. We are told the poor man’s name is Lazarus, (not to be confused with the same guy Jesus raised from the dead – two different guys). The rich man remains nameless. He could be any wealthy person. Leaving someone nameless and anonymous is the bible’s way to help us think about the larger issues.

By naming Lazarus, he becomes personal for us. He becomes someone we know. He becomes the beggar across the table from us. He becomes our brother (or sister) in need, our brother (or sister) in Christ, our neighbor that we can relate to. When those in need pray “give us this day our daily bread,” we feel a natural responsibility to do what we can to provide for their needs. Don’t we?

This passage makes it clear that God is completely aware of the plight of the poor, cares deeply about the issue of poverty in the world, and calls the church to be the body of Christ to engage in the relief efforts for the poor. God knows our situation.

The contrasts continue. The rich man is covered in purple linen; Lazarus, the poor man is covered in sores. The rich man, in life, was blessed with comfort, every need taken care of. Lazarus, in life, lived with torment, discomfort, and the effects of devastating poverty. In his life, the rich man has everything, but in death has nothing. In his life, Lazarus, has nothing, but in his death gains everything.

When death comes, the roles are reversed. The poor man, Lazarus, is in a place of divine favor, a place of heavenly blessing. He is at “Abraham’s side.” The rich man, once robed in splendor and glory, is now in an ugly place, a place of torment, agony and death all around. He can see Lazarus although they are separated by a great chasm.

Notice that even in death, the rich man’s view of Lazarus hasn’t changed. He still sees Lazarus as someone beneath him, someone who might be sent to serve him with cool water. It’s painful, even embarrassing, to see the poverty in the rich man’s heart.

The intensity grows because it didn’t have to be this way. Abraham tells the rich man that what he is asking Lazarus to do for him now, in death, he could himself have done for Lazarus in life, but didn’t. The irony is perhaps the point of the story.

The story ends with a reminder of the death and resurrection of Christ, and how we often miss the opportunity to serve others. We can easily miss the opportunity to serve the needs of others when they pray, “give us this day our daily bread.” Jesus came back from the dead. When we listen to Jesus life takes on a whole new meaning and purpose.

This story points to all kinds of issues and stirs up all kinds of questions for us. There’s a lot going on here. So I invite you to focus on the big picture and that is this. The way things are in our world right now is not the way they have to be. Frank said it best, “Each one of us can make a difference in the world for the better.”

And it’s the little things we do that make a big difference. Yesterday I was working in the office and someone stopped by the church. I explained to him that we needed something fixed. So he went got what was needed and fixed it. We talked about how it’s the little things we do for others that makes a big difference.

This parable points out the fact that our lives do matter. That everyone matters. That God doesn’t make junk. We influence the lives of others – either positively or negatively. What we do, how we live, the way we use our gifts and abilities and resources in this world makes a huge difference in the lives of those around us.

The rich man was jaded by the “comfort” of his accumulation. His fine, purple linens, his level of luxury, and his inability to comprehend how all of that stuff separated him from those around him, which clouded his view of the people around him. They became nothing more than “junk” that got in his way.

As blessed disciples of Jesus, perhaps we need to confess and come to grips with our clouded view of the junk that gets in our way, the way we view the people around us, the way we treat people around us, and the way we sometimes fail to participate in God's relief efforts in our midst.

Truth be told part of the problem is accumulation. We accumulate stuff and then we find a place to store it. At least I do. I keep hinting to my wife that we need to rent a self-storage unit to put our stuff in it – okay put my stuff in it. If not a storage unit then we need at least a four car garage. I even have my kids dreaming with me about building a four car garage someday. We are accumulators.

According to Wikipedia - at the end of 2009, a total of 50,000 self storage facilities, owned by over 30,000 companies (30,235), had been built in the United States. It's believed that there is more than 2.35 billion square feet of self-storage units in the U.S. That's the land mass equal to the size of Manhattan Island three times. WOW!

Yesterday, Amber and I started purging and it felt good to get rid of stuff. I admit it. I have stuff stored away that I haven't looked at in years. Yesterday was a spiritual wake-up call. I kept asking myself, "why – do I have all this stuff?" If we didn't have so much stuff that needed to be stored, perhaps there would be less need for storage, which could create more room for affordable housing, which could benefit the very people who need a place to sleep this cold January night.

How can we provide for the needs of others, as Jesus calls us to do? It's sobering to think that each one of us produces 4.5 pounds of garbage every day which ends up in a landfill. That means each one of us produces over 1600 tons of waste every year that ends up in a landfill. At this point my daughter's question starts to haunt me – *Dad, what the heck are you doing?*

I want to offer you a challenge here this morning. And I want you to challenge me. I believe God is calling us to be an answer to prayer. I believe we are the body of Christ in this place, called to touch the lives of those in need who pray "give us this day our daily bread." What a privilege it is to be an answer to someone's prayer!

So here's what I propose. Once a month we gather food stuff for the Lebanon County Christian Ministry. That ministry helps on the average 225 people a month. Our congregation sends around 80 pounds of food for that ministry each month. What if, we set a goal to send 225 pounds of food stuff next month? What if, we filled the space right outside the church office under the steeple with bags and bags of food stuff for our February delivery? They can especially use:

- * Plastic Grocery Bags
- * Cleaning Supplies
- * Instant Mashed Potatoes
- * Jelly
- * Canned Fruit.

Now I don't mean go home and get something out of your pantry. I mean go to the store and buy at least \$20 worth of stuff. And if you don't have \$20 here is a 20 dollar bill you can have. I'll put it right here under the cross. (I took out a 20 dollar bill from my wallet and placed it on the ledge in front of the processional cross.)

There was a wide chasm between Lazarus and the rich man, but it didn't need to be that way. And it doesn't need to be that way in our day. How might we fill the gap of that chasm and get to where God wants us to be?

I'm convinced that together we can see to it that the Rich man and Lazarus story never needs to happen again. What a relief that certainly would be. Each one of us can make a difference in the world for the better. So what are you going to do? Amen.