

Celebrating the Difference

Luke 16:19-31

Introduction

Between 1994 and 1999, Jay Scott Ballinger and his girlfriend, Angela Wood, set fire to 31 churches across seven states.

- 13 of those churches were in Indiana, including the 100 year-old-white frame church depicted in the opening scene of the movie “Hoosiers.”
- 5 churches were in Georgia
- 4 were in Kentucky
- 3 were in Ohio, including outside of Rockford, OH. That church was in my territory when I was a conference superintendent in my former denomination. It was one of the churches I supervised.
- Alabama, California, South Carolina and Tennessee each had one church on Ballinger’s list.

Sadly, a 27 year-old-volunteer fire fighter was killed while fighting on of the fire in Georgia.

Ballinger’s method for his arson followed a distinctive pattern. Most of the fires were set occurred late at night or early in the morning. The churches were all rural and isolated. He would drive around back, break a window, pour in gasoline, use a lighter to start the fire, and leave.

On July 11, 2000 Ballinger pled guilty to one count of conspiracy, twenty counts of church arson, six counts of arson of a building in interstate commerce and two counts of using fire to commit a federal felony. His guilty plea covered 26 of the 31 arsons, but did not include the five churches in Georgia. Five months later he would plead guilty to five counts of church arson for the Georgia churches, plus admitting that his deeds caused the death of a firefighter.

Georgia sentenced him to life in prison without parole. When he finishes that sentence, he still must serve 42 years for the other 26 charges. His girlfriend got 16 years.

Fires are terrible things. You know that. Some of you know it from personal experience.

- At our council meeting this week, we learned about a family that barely escaped their home before it was destroyed. That fire happened last Sunday morning.
- You’ve all heard the stories about the forest fires out west and seen interviews with the broken-hearted families who lost everything.

Apart from walking through the ashes of three different church fires and the house of a couple of former parishioners, I’ve never had that experience. And I never want to experience it.

In today’s gospel, Jesus introduces us to a man who experienced “fire” firsthand. We also meet another man who experienced quite the opposite. The second man’s name

is Lazarus. We don't know the name of the first man, although around the 4th century, the church began to call him Dives, the Latin word for "wealthy." I will refer to him by that name in today's sermon. Two men. Two different realities.

TWO REALITIES

The reality experienced by Dives is described in verse 19:

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. (Luke 16:19)

His reality consisted of the best of everything. He wore the finest clothes – nothing off the rack for him. Even the color choice of his clothing proclaimed the great wealth he had. You see, the dye necessary to color his clothing purple was incredibly expensive. Only the elite in society could afford to wear anything purple.

In the words of one commentator, Dives:

... lacked nothing which taste and appetite craved and money could procure.

From the perspective of the world, this guy was blessed indeed!

The other reality was very different. By contrast Lazarus ...

At (the rich man's) gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. (Luke 16:20-21)

... was a beggar who had to be carried to the gate of the rich man's house. He was covered with sores that were so pathetic the dogs came by to lick the sores. He had nothing and he did not have the capacity to get anything on his own. He was totally dependent on the generosity of other people to provide for his needs – even to transport him to places where he might encounter a charitable soul. He even had to rely on the tongue of a dog to get medical care.

If – and this is a big "if" – the people in his world even paid any attention to him, they likely turned their faces away.

- "Wonder what he did to deserve that?" they might say. And that might be the kind words. You heard the conversations about people like that.

A COMMON FATE

Different though their realities were drastically different, these two men suffered a common fate. They both died.

As morbid and depressing as it may sound, death is the one thing we all have in common. Assuming Jesus doesn't come back first, one day we will all die.

When I was born the pastor at my church was a man named Tom Hersha. My parents used to tell me that in every sermon Pastor Hersha preached he found a way to insert Hebrews 9:27:

... it is appointed unto man once to die, and after that the judgment ...
(Hebrews 9:27)

And so these two men did. Neither of them was granted any special exemption from this common fate. The result, though, was interesting. A role reversal of sorts. Two new realities come into play for these two men.

TWO NEW REALITIES

For Lazarus, his new reality was wonderful.

The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. (Luke 16:22)

There he experienced relief from all his sufferings. He experienced firsthand what the writer of Revelation proclaimed as he was given a glimpse into heaven himself:

God will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain... (Revelation 21:4)

Dives, on the other, faced a new reality of his own. Once living it up in luxury, he now found himself tormented in hell.

In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. (Luke 16:23)

THE ETERNAL DIFFERENCE

As Jesus tells the story, it seems that the thing that made the difference in the new realities in the lives of Dives and Lazarus was how they responded to the Scriptures.

(Dives) answered, "Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment."

Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them."

"No, father Abraham," he said, "but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent."

(God) said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." (Luke 9:27-31)

From his place of agony in hell, Dives thought about his five brothers. This might have been the first time he ever thought about the welfare of anyone else! Who knows? He certainly never thought about the welfare of Lazarus when they both were alive. But now he hoped there might be a way to warn his five brothers about the reality they faced if they continued to live as he once did.

Dives wanted a miracle, a resurrection! Surely his brothers would pay attention to that! But his request was denied. If the five brothers are to avoid the reality of hell, they will need to meet God in His Word.

APPLICATION

There are many things this text points out to me, but here is one of the most important ones:

The role of a church that faithfully proclaims the truths of Scripture makes an eternal difference.

The salvation of those five brothers is not going to happen because a beggar rises from the dead. It is going to happen because they hear the Word of God proclaimed and by faith believe in the God of the Bible.

The Message paraphrase beautifully communicates this truth:

But how can people call for help if they don't know who to trust? And how can they know who to trust if they haven't heard of the One who can be trusted? And how can they hear if nobody tells them? The point is: Before you trust, you have to listen. But unless Christ's Word is preached, there's nothing to listen to. (Romans 10:14-17)

Today you are being given an opportunity to make your commitment to the work of Jesus Christ through the ministry of this congregation. All month long we have attempted to stress to you the eternal importance of letting your light shine through the ways you invest your time, talent, testimony and treasure.

You and I both know there are plenty of options for the resources you have. I'm sure that many of you, like Karen and me, receive appeals from many different organizations, asking you to contribute, to pray, to volunteer and so on. While most of them are certainly worthy of your consideration, I say with 100% confidence that none of them makes the eternal difference your church does.

And in the final reality, it is only the eternal difference that matters. That's what we celebrate today.

May God bless you as you make your commitments to Him this day. Amen.