

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Luke 16:19-31

"There once was a rich man, expensively dressed in the latest fashions, wasting his days in conspicuous consumption. A poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, had been dumped on his doorstep. All he lived for was to get a meal from scraps off the rich man's table. His best friends were the dogs who came and licked his sores.

"Then he died, this poor man, and was taken up by the angels to the lap of Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In hell and in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham in the distance and Lazarus in his lap. He called out, 'Father Abraham, mercy! Have mercy! Send Lazarus to dip his finger in water to cool my tongue. I'm in agony in this fire.'

"But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that in your lifetime you got the good things and Lazarus the bad things. It's not like that here. Here he's consoled and you're tormented. Besides, in all these matters there is a huge chasm set between us so that no one can go from us to you even if he wanted to, nor can anyone cross over from you to us.'

"The rich man said, 'Then let me ask you, Father: Send him to the house of my father where I have five brothers, so he can tell them the score and warn them, so they won't end up here in this place of torment.'

"Abraham answered, 'They have Moses and the Prophets to tell them the score. Let them listen to them.'

"I know, Father Abraham,' he said, 'but they're not listening. If someone came back to them from the dead, they would change their ways.'

"Abraham replied, 'If they won't listen to Moses and the Prophets, they're not going to be convinced by someone who rises from the dead.'"

In 2007 the popular film "The Bucket List," starring Morgan Freeman and Jack Nicholson, was released, popularizing the phrase "bucket list." A "bucket list" refers to a list of things people yearn to do or see or accomplish before they die. Perhaps they wish to marvel at the Taj Mahal, skydive, hike up to Machu Picchu, shake the hand of the president, cook the perfect soufflé, watch a game at every Major League ballpark—the lists are as varied as the people who assemble them.

The goal is to accumulate memorable experiences, as one would fill a bucket with strawberries at the pick-your-own berry farm.

What would a Christian bucket list look like? Well, let's start with the bucket. Would it be turned upright, to accumulate the most desirable experiences possible? Or would it be turned upside down, to pour out goodness upon the world?

In the parable that was read for us today, we learn from Jesus that a deeply Christian bucket list focuses on making others happy, so the Christian bucket is turned upside down to pour out goodness on to others.

Jesus tells the story of a rich man who was "dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day." The man dies, is buried and finds himself in Hades being tormented.

Does he have any regrets? Jesus implies that he does. But none of his regrets involve poor business decisions or missed opportunities to make money. He had all the money he needed and could afford to do whatever he wanted. No, the rich man's regrets seem to go in a different direction.

In the story, Jesus tells us that the rich man was not alone in his life and his death. He tells us, "At the rich man's 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; even the dogs would come and lick his sores."

Lazarus may have had some regrets, but his regrets probably did not include wishing he had let himself be happier. For Lazarus, happiness was not a choice. He had to depend on the generosity of people like the rich man to throw him a scrap from his table, which never came. The rich man gave Lazarus nothing, but the dogs did not ignore Lazarus.

Dogs in the Biblical and rabbinic traditions are almost as unclean as pigs. Both the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures are clear witnesses to this. Dogs are kept as guard dogs (Isaiah 56:10), never as pets. Only those who feed them dare approach them. A rich man needs such dogs because they are his "home security system." The story assumes that the guard dogs are fed the scraps Lazarus longs to eat (Matthew 15:27). Lazarus goes hungry. The dogs are fed.

Yet, those wild guard dogs, whom no one but their handlers dare approach, realize that the weak, sick man by the gate is their friend. They lick his wounds. The saliva of a dog's mouth is sterile. The ancients discovered that when a dog licks a person's sores or wounds, healing occurs more rapidly. Archeologists in Archelon, Israel, have recently uncovered a center where 1,300 dogs were buried in individual plots. The site has been identified as a Phoenician semi-religious center where the sick could go, pay a fee and have trained dogs lick their wounds as medical treatment. In this parable, the dogs' master refuses to help the poor sick man outside his gate, but his wild guard dogs will do what they can. They will lick his wounds. Their master will not help Lazarus. They will. Lazarus' quiet gentle spirit breaks through their violent hostility to humans, and they care for him knowing that he cares for them.

Jesus tells us that "the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried." And there, in Hades, we begin to get a sense of the rich man's regrets.

Regret Number 1. the rich man was probably thinking, *I wish that I had cared for the people around me.* He certainly had the opportunity to do that. The poor man Lazarus was lying at his gate, covered with sores and the rich man stepped over or around him each time he left his home. Every single day, the rich man missed a chance to help Lazarus by simply giving him the leftovers from his table.

Regret Number 2. *I wish that I had listened to Moses and the prophets.* The rich man realizes in death that he had not paid attention to the word of God as it came through Moses, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18). He had not heeded the prophet Isaiah, who commanded, "Share your bread with the hungry ... bring the homeless poor into your house" (Isaiah 58:7).

Regret Number 3. *I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.* Every day, the rich man had ignored poor Lazarus, fully aware of the teachings of Moses and the prophets. But he didn't have the courage to live a life of integrity—one in which his actions were in line with what he observed and what he believed.

The rich man saw the poor man and knew that Moses and the prophets commanded him to help. But he did not. The rich man fell into a trap set by people who blamed Lazarus for his poverty, insisting that he must be lazy or morally deficient. Sitting around the rich man's table, his friends would say, "God rewards goodness and punishes wickedness.... It's always been that way! So dress lavishly and eat sumptuously. You deserve it!" That's what the people in the days of Jesus believed.

When the rich man gets to Hades, he realizes that he blew it while he was alive. It was too late for him then, but he thought about his brothers. He says to Abraham, "I beg you to send Lazarus to my father's house—for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment" (Luke 16:27-28). The rich man cares deeply for his brothers; he is not a man without feelings.

But Abraham replies, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them."

The rich man realizes that Abraham was right, but he also admits that knowing the words of Moses and the prophets was not enough to get him to change his life. He tells Abraham that it will take something bigger, more shocking than the teachings of Moses and the prophets, to get them to listen and change. Surely they will turn their lives around if dead Lazarus comes back to life and warns them!

Shaking his head, Abraham says, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

Abraham is talking to us, right along with the rich man and his brothers. Are we convinced? Are we persuaded to change our ways if someone actually rises from the dead? Someone was sent to us, and he also rose from the grave after dying for our sins. Jesus has risen, but many of us still have regrets.

Now, let's be clear: None of us is perfect, and we will all come to the end of life feeling that we have made mistakes along the way. There are choices we feel badly about, alongside opportunities we wish we had seized. We cannot turn the clock back so we can change the things we said or the things we did, nor can we change the things we neglected to say and do through repentance and God's saving grace. We are forgiven and given another chance to avoid making the same mistakes that lead to painful regrets.

The top regrets of the rich man can teach us the lessons that we, like his five brothers, need to learn. We don't want to leave this lifetime saying: "*I wish that I had cared for the people around me. I wish that I had listened to Moses, the prophets and Jesus. I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, in which my actions were in line with my beliefs.*"

We are not yet in the afterlife, calling out to Father Abraham. We are not stuck in a place of regretting that we did not do enough, that we did not do more, that we did not choose wisely, that we did not have enough time. As long as we are breathing, we can choose to care for the people around us, listen to the teachings of the Bible, and live a life that is true to our deepest convictions. If we do, we'll have no big regrets.

Joseph Stowell, shared this personal story in his book, *A Heart for the City*.

The Chicago-based newspaper "Street Wise" is sold by homeless people who collect a portion of the proceeds. One day as I walked to work, I passed a "Street Wise" vendor. It was a bitterly cold January morning, and I'd already stopped by Starbucks and paid more than a buck for a measly cup of coffee. Feeling noble, I struggled to find my wallet, reached in, and took out a dollar.

The homeless woman asked, "Do you really want the paper, or can I keep it to sell to someone else?"

"Keep the paper," I replied. Then I added, "How are you today?"

"I'm so cold," she said.

"I hope the sun comes out, it warms up, and you have a good day," I told her as I turned to go.

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I continued on, with the cup of coffee warming my hand. About half a block later, the conversation finally registered. I wrestled for a moment with what I should do, but I was late, so I kept walking. Ever since, I've regretted not giving her a cup of hot coffee in Christ's name.

Choices do not have to be large to be life-changing. The rich man in the story Jesus told could have simply shared some of his food with Lazarus in order to care for the people around him. In the same way, we can share simple acts of kindness with others and make a positive difference in someone's life. Putting our actions in line with our beliefs—living a life of integrity—is a change that is made one choice at a time.

The result is a life you won't regret. Amen.