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by Pat Marrin

[View Author Profile](#)  
[patrickjmarrin@gmail.com](mailto:patrickjmarrin@gmail.com).

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“More tortuous than all else is the human heart” (Jeremiah 17:9).

*Jer 17:5-10; Luke 16:19-31*

Only Luke has the parable of Lazarus, a well-crafted tale that brings home the critical importance of compassion for the poor as the basis for final judgment. The contrast could not be starker between the poor man lying at the doorstep of a rich man who knows his name but is oblivious to his needs as he steps over him on his way to another banquet. The chasm the rich man creates between them in this life is replicated in eternity. Lazarus dies and goes to the bosom of Abraham; the rich man dies and goes to hell.

Jesus directs the parable to the Pharisees and no doubt to the Sadducees, wealthy traditionalists who lived lavishly because they did not believe in an afterlife or Scripture beyond the five books of the Torah. In torment, the rich man begs Abraham to warn his “five brothers,” but it is too late. If they haven’t heeded Moses, even a messenger from the dead will not save them. The parable reappears in John’s Gospel as the raising of Lazarus, the messenger no one listens to who points to Jesus as the Resurrection and the Life, the final I AM sign before Jesus’ own death and resurrection.

Lent is designed to get our attention on what is essential. A meaningful life in this world connects our natural call to know and love God to our responsibility for one another, especially the most vulnerable. The “good life” isolated and indifferent to the poor separates us from God. Without God we have no hope of a full life on this

earth or life after death because love is the key to life. Only love makes life worth living and only love overcomes death. Without love, even if we surround ourselves with life's goods and pleasures, we are already dead.

The most striking aspect of the parable of Lazarus is the gulf the rich man unknowingly creates between himself and heaven by ignoring his poor neighbor. Our contemporary world has done the same by economic apartheid, zip codes, zoning and redlining to insure the rich and the poor seldom cross paths. Rich nations segregate poor nations with walls and restrictive immigration, using their labor and resources, their natural beauty for tourism, while ignoring their poverty and exploitation. How shocked will we be at judgment to know God's view of our world, its lifestyles and inequalities seamlessly joined by design to benefit some at the expense of others?

The Just**Faith** Ministries programs many parishes have engaged in to introduce them to Catholic Social Justice Teaching and to provide "border crossing" experiences in their own cities is a direct response to the parable of Lazarus. How many have been blessed to be able to begin to lessen the gaps and gulfs that have isolated so many of us from God and our neighbors. <https://justfaith.org/get-involved/justfaith-network/>

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