

“The Life That Really Is Life”
The Rev. Dr. Brandon Perrine

¹⁹ “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰ And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹ who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²² The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham.^[a] The rich man also died and was buried. ²³ In Hades, where he was being tormented, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side.^[b] ²⁴ He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in agony in these flames.’ ²⁵ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things and Lazarus in like manner evil things, but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. ²⁶ Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’ ²⁷ He said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house— ²⁸ for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ ²⁹ Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ ³⁰ He said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’ ³¹ He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

The story is told of a young woman who regretted breaking her engagement and wrote this letter:

Dearest Tommy, No words could ever express the great unhappiness I've felt since breaking our engagement. Please say you'll take me back. No one could ever take your place in my heart, so please forgive me. I love you, I love you, I love you!

PS: And congratulations on winning the state lottery.¹

Unlike this little anecdote, the story Jesus told in our reading from Luke's gospel is a really good story. It's an *effective* story. It makes us think. It stirs our emotions. It riles our sense of justice. It lifts up the underdog and calls into question the comforts of the wealthy. And if we're honest, it may make us squirm a little too, because it raises questions about how each of us notices—or doesn't notice—the suffering at our own gates. It also grosses us out a bit.

It's a good story. It's an effective story. But what is it *really* about? Well, for one thing, it's *not* really about the afterlife—heaven and hell, the bosom of Abraham and Hades. For another thing, it's *not* really about economics. The author of our reading from the First Letter to Timothy correctly identified the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. But it's possible to have money without loving it, right?

And the story is really not about divine justice where good guys get their reward in heaven and bad guys get their “reward” in hell. Because of some clues in the text, we can justifiably lump the rich man in with the bad guys, but Lazarus, he doesn't do anything in the story except lay there outside the gate and hang out with Abraham. His role reminds us that dignity doesn't depend on merit or accomplishment. His worth is not in what he does, but simply in who he is.

¹ “Changing Love,” Ministry127.com: <https://ministry127.com/resources/illustrations/humor?page=16>.

The truth is, this story *is* about the afterlife, and economics, and divine justice, even though it doesn't fit neatly into one of those categories. And there's more. That's what makes for a good story—layers of meaning, subtlety and ambiguity and just enough clarity to hold our attention.

Today, I'd like to spend a few minutes with the last part of the story, the part that usually gets glossed over in most sermons. After being denied water, the rich man called back across the chasm to where Lazarus was with the patriarch Abraham and said, "I beg you, father, to send [Lazarus] to my . . . brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment." But Abraham replied, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

There's no indication anywhere in our text that the rich man was remorseful for doing nothing while knowing the name of the poor man suffering at his gate, dying of starvation and covered in painful sores—no indication that he was sorry for his inaction. We do, however, sense regret—regret that his actions and inactions have led him to this time and place, and an earnest desire to ensure that members of his family won't end up there with him.

Regret may be the most tragic of human emotions. It does nothing for anyone. But remorse can lead to change. Contrition can lead to change. Resolve can lead to change. Regret leaves us stuck in the past. As the Danish novelist Peter Høeg once said, "Regret is an odd emotion because it comes a moment too late."

Today, I'm struck by this text's stark, though understated, warning against living a life filled with regret. Happily, our text from First Timothy tells us how not to.

The reading begins, 'there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment.' Godliness here means devotion, a kind of spiritual practice

that steadies us in this life and whatever comes after.² Contentment carries a Stoic sense: the freedom of not being ruled by circumstances.³

The author goes on to say that people who are truly rich—joy-filled and happy—are those who ‘are rich in good works, generous, and ready to share.’ This isn’t just private piety, but communal generosity. Living this way lets us ‘take hold of the life that really is life’—a life of joy, of contentment, of richness without regret. Tending to our spiritual center, being content in ourselves (even while we may work to improve our own life circumstances or those of others), doing good for others, and being generous—these enable us to live the kinds of lives that make us feel rich indeed. The life that really is life.

Of course, that doesn’t mean we won’t stumble. We will—because we’re human. But when we do, we can feel remorse, make amends, and try again. That’s very different from living stuck in regret. It’s living openly, authentically, mindfully, empathetically, and fully—the life that really is life. That’s the invitation to us this day.

Let’s not live like the rich man in Jesus’ story, looking back with regret at the life we led. Instead, let’s look forward—living well today, tomorrow, and always. Living generously. Living with open eyes for the suffering at our gates. Living the life that really is life. May it be so. Amen.

² Christian A. Eberhart. “Commentary on 1 Timothy 6:6-19,” Workingpreacher.org, September 29, 2013: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-26-3/commentary-on-1-timothy-66-19-3>.

³ Ibid.