

# “Jesus the Includer”

**Jeremiah 32:1-3a; 6-15; I Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16: 19-31**

**Part three of the sermon series,  
“Revive Us Again: A Return to Jesus’ Original Program”**

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From the Pulpit

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**“Jesus the Includer”**

Jeremiah 32:1-3a; 6-15; I Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16: 19-31

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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We just heard Jesus tell a parable about “a rich man” and Lazarus – the only person ever named in Jesus’ parables. He tells the story to shake up his audience. And today, we are his audience. Luke recounts this parable with shrewd social geography. The rich man, enmeshed in his wine and purple finery, dwells on the secure side of a door and practices routines that insulate him from noticing anyone on the outside. Lazarus is on the outside. Lazarus, whose name means “God will help us,” lives on the other side of that door in the squaller outside the mansion.

Surrounded by dogs and described as if his wounds of his body were his attire, Lazarus appeared as the stark opposite of the inner circle's lavish luxury. When the two of them die – as everyone does – the story turns upside down. Angels fly to carry Lazarus to the bosom of Abraham. The rich man dies, is buried, and finds himself in “Hades,” the obscure habitation named for the Greek god of the underworld and wealth. Death exalts Lazarus and disrobes the rich man of everything that had given him identity.

From his place among the nameless dead, the once-wealthy man sees Lazarus glorying in the arms of Abraham. In life, even though he had to literally step over and around Lazarus to get into his mansion, the rich man never noticed him. Now, in eternity, as Lazarus had become untouchable, the rich man finally sees him and even learns his name.

Undoing that tiny step toward esteeming the existence of another, he revealed that he remains completely self-absorbed: “Father Abraham! See how I suffer! Order that beggar to help me!”

That is not going to happen! When Abraham explains that it is impossible, the man continues exposing the miniscule size of his circle of concern: now that he has discovered eternal truth, he cares only about his siblings. Abraham explains the tragic truth that if people remain deaf to Moses and the prophets, not even someone who rises from the dead can displace them from being the center of their carefully cultivated and very tiny universe.

As we have seen, Luke's Gospel becomes more pointed as Jesus travels toward the culmination of his ministry in Jerusalem, and his emphasis on serving the poor continues to grow along his call to the cost of discipleship.

As this moves, I think of someone who came before us in history – Charles Dickens. Charles Dickens left school at the age of 12 because he couldn't afford to be in school when his father was sent to debtor's prison. His father was put in debtor's prison and Charles was put out of the classroom. He illustrated Jesus' values for the 19th century with a more hopeful version of this parable in his classic, *A Christmas Carol*.

We all know the story. Dickens introduces us to Scrooge as a miser who believed that poor people are an unnecessary bother – unworthy of serious consideration – and destined for the poor houses. Happily, three ghosts lead Scrooge through a review of his past, offering him a last-ditch opportunity to create a different present and a future in which he could put his “mammon” (his wealth) to good use. All the world cheers each December as the converted Scrooge celebrates Christmas with the family he had disparaged.

Unfortunately, we can't count on ghosts to appear when people like us become blinded by the things of our lives. Let's just say, The Gospel is our Ghost – leading us to see what we need to do outside our doors and all the way around the world.

Let's remember - the wealthy man in Jesus' story was never blamed or made responsible for Lazarus' poverty. He is not blamed for Lazarus' cause of poverty. Similarly, few of us have consciously added to the impoverishment of unhoused women and men outside our doors, or the migrants or refugees growing in numbers each day. None of us have knowingly promoted or profited from the Russia's attack and savage war against Ukraine. But Jesus' parable has nothing to do with causes. It has to do with effects. He is talking about people who fail to respond to others' suffering and need.

When Jesus gives Lazarus a name, he acknowledges his unique, personal dignity and worth. Naming Lazarus serves as a prelude to describing how Abraham lavishing him with respectful tenderness will play itself out – while the wealthy man remains anonymous, allowing himself to be defined by position and possessions rather than relationships. Unlike the crafty servant in last week’s parable, the rich man fails to discover the potential of his wealth – which was there all along. Instead, he watches his wealth become worthless in the face of death.

Jesus, the partygoer, never critiques festivity. He also never fails to interact with people in their suffering. Why is this? Why did Jesus become this way? Perhaps it came from his birth. Perhaps it was because he was born outside a house in barn in December in Bethlehem. Perhaps it was because he was a refugee within days of his birth – fleeing for his life and growing up the outsider in Egypt as a young boy. Perhaps it was when he returned to his homeland and discovered that in the aftermath of his leaving, every Jewish firstborn son of the House of David was slaughtered – leaving him the sole male survivor in David’s line from his year of birth and he grew up as the only Jewish boy of his generation. Perhaps it was because his father died when he was young, and the young carpenter of Nazareth was given care of his entire household – his mother, his brothers and his sisters. All of these and many more circumstances heightened Jesus’ sensitivity to outsiders, to refugees, to those were migrants, those who carried the loads of life, and those who forged his awareness of outsiders. He could speak to shepherds and beggars because he had been outside, too. He had been outside with them and like them. But he also made sure everyone was invited to his



party. He had this way of bringing them back in – joyfully. Jesus spiced up every celebration of which he had been apart.

He always had this way of drawing people in. If you have ever felt like an outsider in your life, maybe that's where you feel this special connection to Jesus – and I know he feels it with you. If you have ever felt cast out and left alone, if you have ever felt that somebody has run your name down into the mud, if you have ever lost your stature or your place, then you know how he relates to you. If any of you have felt like an outsider, you know exactly what he is going through.

Jesus has never been about hawking tickets for guilt trips. He has always been about trying to entice us and draw us into awareness that stretching ourselves, reaching outside ourselves, and having adventures beyond ourselves makes our journey in life special. It is this process of inclusion that Jesus joyfully calls us to engage. You see, it is one thing to care about the poor and even donate for the poor – but to go the step farther is the thing he calls us to do. Prayers and donations don't call us out. They call us in and he is calling us outside – to escape the inside trap.

Our time is much too limited on this earth. And our resources are much too limited to just simply give that way. We are actually called to meet and greet the “other,” the migrant, the beggar and whoever will enlarge our circle of concern. We have to begin by making a choice to include others and then Learn each other's names as the next step in a journey headed toward enjoying the bosom of Abraham together (drawn from Sr. Mary M. McGlone, “Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time: Escape the ‘insider’ trap,” *National Catholic Reporter*, September 24, 2022).

We are a people whose origin story begins as outsiders. In 1852, 27 women and 15 men could no longer be inside a Christian church that said it is okay to have slaves, to abuse people, to use slaves for your profit. They couldn't do that any longer. These 42 abolitionist Christians and leaders in the Underground Railroad Movement set forth to forge a new congregation dedicated to include others.

We have to believe that Lazarus was cheering them on as he and Father Abraham and Jesus right by his side, cheering them on as they marched down 3rd Street to their new location. They must have been saying, "Hey those people are on the right path. We want to see more people join them and forever work for the abolishment of slavery!"

You know what, those 42 forebearers in faith gave us a spiritual DNA that we can't shake. It is in us. By their example, they helped change the landscape of Columbus, Ohio, America and the world. They showed us a better way. They showed us how to live into the fullness of liberating faith and placed us on their shoulders in the battle against racial injustice.

How have we done? How have we done for the past 170 years? Have we lived into the fullness of their initial challenge and call to justice? Have we, whose origins were as outsiders, become "insiders" or have we maintained our strong presence outside the gates? Have we stood with Lazarus – who we know by name or have we joined forces with the nameless rich who have forgotten where we came from?

I think the answer is a mixed bag of inside/outside truth. Some days are better than others. Some weeks are better than others. Some years are better than others in the effort to stand with those outside the gates. But the call is still clear. Our plumbline is still there. It is still very recognizable! We can't be members and friends of First Church

unless we DO Justice, LOVE Mercy and WALK HUMBLY with our God, as the prophet Micah invokes.

Years ago, theologian Robert McAfee Brown offered a clear vision of how to stand up and how to speak out for justice. He said, “Stand up and speak out on behalf of the poor and those who need your voice in this world. Remember these three things as you do:

- 1) where you stand will determine what you will see;**
- 2) whom you stand with will determine what you hear;**
- 3) what you see and hear will determine what you say and how you act.”**

Those three guides for standing, seeing, hearing and acting can be applied to all of life and all sorts of situations in life. We encounter this every day. We have people all around us who are standing with certain folks and we have no idea what they are looking at or seeing – because we are supposedly looking at the exact same thing and don’t see anything like what they see. Or we find ourselves standing with only certain people and hearing only what they saying about any given situation. We have to bother to gain another perspective because we have made up our minds – thanks to them. Then, we make up our minds based on all this, what we will say and do.

Throughout the ages, divisions have been created when where you stand, what you see or hear and how you act get set in stone. It happens now, just like it happened years ago and through the ages. As one person said to me recently, “don’t confuse me with the facts. I already have my mind made up.”

How do we make choices in difficult times? How do we determine where we will stand and more? Let’s turn back to the plumbline



himself. Let's return to Jesus the Includer. Let's watch what he does. He calls us to move outside ourselves and get to know the names of those we have neglected to know. HE calls us to find harmony in community. He calls us to find unity in our shared vision. While, like the rich man, we all want to get into heaven, we will discover that Jesus wants even more for Heaven to get into us. When that happens, we will find ourselves in the bosom of Abraham – right next to Lazarus and right beside Jesus – right alongside the other Includers we have known through the ages – but especially today – alongside the 42 – the Includers got us here in the first place. Amen.