

REAL SURVIVORS
© Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine
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University Congregational Church

Reading: Luke 16: 19-31 (NRSV)

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his 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. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. 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.’

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. 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.’

He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him 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.’

Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’

He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’

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.’”

I know that preachers often have the reputation of being conservative. By reputation they are reluctant to embrace cultural changes, fads, and fashions. Preachers are more like the old New England farmer 100 who was

celebrating his one hundredth birthday. A reporter from the local daily interviewed him. “No doubt you have seen many changes in your long life.”

“Yes sir,” said the old farmer. “And let me tell you right now that I’ve been against every darn one of them.”

So I confess to you this morning that I am maintaining proper ministerial curmudgeonly practice. And the subject of my ire is the so-called “reality” television programs such as *Survivors*, *Big Brother*, and *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*

I have been assured me that these programs are only for entertainment purposes. But that is also what they told the Christians about the gladiatorial games in Rome. Our games and our entertainment say lot about our culture. They reflect our sense of community, the value we place on human lives, our understanding of wealth, and the nature of our competitive society. And that is precisely what concerns me about these programs. I am deeply troubled by the image of community that they project to the viewing public.

The community that *Survivors* projects is a community that has little or nothing to do with the survival of human beings. At the beginning of *Survivors* an announcer states, “Marooned for 39 days, they must work together to build shelter, find food, and survive the island, but ultimately it is everyone for themselves.”

Anybody who has ever studied human community, especially communities in peril, knows that “everyone for themselves” is a prescription for death. Indeed, one who advocated such a position in ancient communities would probably be put to death.

Survivors is the anti-community ultimately concerned about the survival of the self. And survival is understood as personal popularity, interpersonal triangulation, and manipulation. Real survival skills are not germane to the program. Excuse me, but shooting arrows into a target for the privilege of watching a video, and then deciding whether to include other cast members in the viewing is not a profound existential or moral issue for the well being of human kind. The *Survivors* community is egocentric and debases the human beings within it.

The idea that persons in community are voted off the island – out of community – is a frightening reminder of the extremes that social Darwinism can be taken to in places like Auschwitz. The rules of the game were not much different. We simply take out of the “game” those who cannot make a contribution, do not help us “win,” or whom we simply do not like. You know the kind – Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, the handicapped, and political dissidents.

I submit to you that such an idea of community undermines the essence of democracy. The goal of a program like *Survivors* is to divide the participants into factions, and to pit one against the other. The challenge is not so much to engage the battle, as it is to get other competitors to fight against and eliminate each other. Real democracy calls for the rule of the majority, while at the same time protecting the rights of the minority. Democracy seeks the common welfare. Survival in a democracy depends on a common social contract that all persons must seek to honor.

Another profoundly disturbing aspect of these programs is the definition of community as one without boundaries. The idea of private citizenship is lost to a level of voyeurism that is aesthetically offensive and diminishes human dignity. I do not like to watch my wife brush her teeth, much less a total stranger. *The Real World* program once featured a drunken young woman named Melissa doing a striptease at a New Orleans bar. I am not enlightened or entertained by such a program.

Do not misunderstand me. Please do not think I am just a prude. Having spent over thirty-three years in the ministry I have seen nearly every form of human brokenness, both natural and self-inflicted. I have worked with mentally ill people who were so psychotic they could not even attend to their own bodily functions. I have visited women and men in prisons who

were convicted of everything from armed robbery to murder to sex crimes. But these are not appropriate entertainment events, and the human community is not strengthened by constant exposure to bedroom rituals or the arrest of drunks on *Cops*.

The loss of privacy leads to the degrading of human beings and the erosion of human mystery. Where dignity is lost it is a simple thing to eliminate from society those who are mentally or physically challenged, poor and illiterate, of a different sexual orientation, color, or religion. I submit to you that all vestiges of community will wash away with mystery, and no one will survive.

I believe that the survival unit of the future is not the egocentric individualist. The survival unit of the future is the entire community and its environment. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "In a real sense all life is interrelated. All are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny." All are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, even the poorest and weakest members of our community.

That is the point of the story of the story Jesus told of the rich man clothed in purple and Lazarus. Luke writes that the rich man clothed in purple engaged a sumptuous feast every day. The purple and fine linen

suggests royalty, and we can imagine that the man was among the official ruling elite of an urban community.

On the other hand is Lazarus. His name literally means, “he whom God helps.” How ironic it is that “he whom God helps” is poor and in wretched health. Lazarus was a street beggar, and in the minds of many people in ancient Palestine, as in modern America, beggars must be sinners. God has surely forsaken them. What a contrast to the rich man whom God has surely blessed. The poverty and hunger of Lazarus has so depleted him that he can only lie prostrate at the rich man’s gate. He does not even have the strength to beg. His only desire is to be fed from the scraps that fall from the rich man’s table. But he is too weak to even ask for these crumbs. Dogs come and lick the seeping sores on his body but he is too enervated to drive them away. Lazarus would have been the first person booted off of television’s island of *Survivors*.

What the two men have in common is the gate. Every day the rich man passes through the gate. He cannot possibly enter and exit the gate without seeing Lazarus. We expect him to do something, to respond somehow to the festering wretch at his door. Perhaps he will take the poor man in; or take him to a shelter for the homeless; or have a servant bring him a crust of bread and a cup of water. Or we can imagine that he might call the

authorities and have Lazarus arrested for vagrancy or at least driven away by his household servants. But the rich man does not even see Lazarus. He is impervious to Lazarus and the gate neither swings open nor closed.

Clearly, the only function of the gate is to heighten the fact that the rich man is inside the house enjoying sumptuous meals and Lazarus is outside suffering his poverty. Rather than serving as a passage of compassion, a portal of common unity, the gate only serves as a barrier to Lazarus and the rich man. The gate becomes the symbol of a broken human community.

The story concludes with a scene in the afterlife. Angels have carried Lazarus to the bosom of father Abraham. Abraham was also a rich man according to the book of Genesis. And Lazarus was cradled in his arms like a child suckled by its mother. The man clothed in purple linens also died but found himself in Hades. Luke states that he was in torment and suffered a thirst that could not be quenched. Seeing Lazarus in the bosom of Abraham he begged the ancient father to allow Lazarus to dip his finger in water and place it on his parched lips. But Abraham told the man it was too late. It was even too late to warn the rich man's brothers of the fate of those whose understanding of community is a matter of self-definition.

Was the man in Hades because he was wealthy and powerful? No. No where does the story suggest that wealth is the vehicle to hell. Listen very carefully. It was not the rich man's wealth that damned him. The rich man was condemned because of his blinding indifference to the plight of the poor.

In fact, Abraham was a wealthy and powerful man. Abraham knew no strangers. He was the model of hospitality, making room at his table for all who traveled by, regardless of their station in life. Abraham made them feel welcome. He gave them rest. He fed them and gave them food for their journey. Abraham saw himself in solidarity with every human being that wandered the desert of life.¹ The man clothed in purple linen saw only the differences between himself and others. Abraham opened the gate. The man clothed in purple kept the gate closed. And there comes a time when we suffer ultimate alienation because we maintain differences and divisions, whether it is the barrier of color or culture, economic status or gender, politics or religion.

At no place in this story are we to assume that those who are poor are better people than the rich. In fact, we know nothing about the personal ethics of Lazarus. He says nothing. He does nothing. But that is not the

¹ Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*; Fortress Press, Minneapolis: 1989, p. 155.

point of the parable. The question is not whether Lazarus is deserving or what he should be doing to get off welfare and on to workfare. The question is our vision of community. Do we see ourselves above others and removed from their plight? Or, do we see others as essential threads in the fabric of our common life? Do we open gates for them so that they might be full participants in our society? Do we place ourselves in unity with their needs and their dreams?

Jurgen Moltmann reminds us that, “A closed human being no longer has any hope. Such a person is full of anxiety. A closed society no longer has any future. It kills hope for life of those who stand on its periphery, and then it finally destroys itself. Hope is lived, and it comes alive when we go outside ourselves and, in joy and pain, take part in the lives of others. It becomes concrete in open community with others.”²

Real survivors are those who build relationships. Real survivors are those who create community, who reconcile the community, who heal the community, and who feed the community. Real survivors place themselves in solidarity with all human beings. Real survivors open the gate, go out into the world and bring others into the community of grace.

² Jurgen Moltmann, *The Passion for Life*, translated by M. Douglas Meeks; Fortress Press, Philadelphia: 1978, p. 35.

I think of my mother and father-in-law, Gloria and Ernest Leo. If you were to visit their home you would have no doubt about their Roman Catholic faith. There are saints and crucifixes all over the place. St. Francis is represented several times over, as is the Blessed Virgin, and the Bleeding Heart Jesus. There are pictures of the pope in the kitchen. There is not a room in the house that does not have a sainted host. One of my first surprises after Mimi and I were married was to visit their house and find a lighted candle in the bathtub. Gloria lights candles for people she is worried about – wayward grandchildren, sick friends, and of course, the pope. She had a candle lit for my son, Christopher, for the year he served in Afghanistan. Why is the prayer candle in the bathtub? So she won't burn down the house. These icons and devotional life are only the rituals of their deeper commitments.

For their entire adult lives Gloria and Ernest have cared for the poor – sending impoverished children to summer camp; working the soup kitchen of St. Vincent De Paul; helping deliver Thanksgiving meals to the aged and those who suffer AIDS. As a hospice chaplain I served a client who was dying of AIDS and whose apartment was sweltering hot. I managed to find a window unit air conditioner but needed help installing it. Before I could

even ask Ernie for his help he had the air conditioner in his truck, the motor running.

But their hospitality does not end there. Mimi's brother, Vince, is now an Episcopalian. Mimi's sister, Anna, married a Jew and they are raising their daughter in the Jewish faith. Vita celebrated her bat mitzvah. And then there is Mimi, who married a Unitarian minister. But each of us, and all of our children, are deeply loved and welcomed into their home. My children by previous marriage are remembered at Christmas. Gloria wrote in my birthday card, "God bless you with many more happy and healthy birthdays so that you can make others live their lives happier." Her words not only express love, but also affirm my ministry. We have all been taken into their hearts and home and given a place there.

Ernest and Gloria are real survivors. They know how to open the gates.

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