

During World War II, soldiers endured freezing nights in foxholes with little food, constant shelling, and the fear of death. Yet when veterans were later asked what was the hardest part, many did not speak of hunger or danger, but of the crushing loneliness of being far from loved ones, unsure if they would ever embrace them again. We are created for relationship, and the greatest anguish of the human heart is not physical pain but the torment of being cut off—from those we love, and ultimately from God himself.

In Luke's Gospel today, the rich man cries out that he is "in agony." The Greek word used here points not only to physical torment but to a deeper anguish of soul: the sorrow of being cut off from God and from love.

This is the only parable where Jesus lets someone speak from beyond the grave, and the rich man's words show us what true torment is: not physical pain alone, but the loneliness of a life turned in on itself, closed to the poor and closed to God.

The rich man had everything in this world, yet he failed to open his heart, and so in eternity he knows the pain of separation. The same Greek word appears earlier in Luke's Gospel on Mary's lips when she and Joseph searched for Jesus for three days before finding him in the

temple. They too felt anguish—but theirs was born of love, of longing for the One they cherished. The word also appears in the Acts of the Apostles, where the Ephesians experience deep sorrow when Paul tells them they will never see his face again. The anguish of Mary, Joseph and the Ephesians flows from bonds of love; the anguish of the rich man flows from the absence of love.

And what makes the rich man's fate so tragic is that, in a very real sense, he chose it. As Bishop Mueggenborg points out, "Note how the rich man is only concerned for himself and his own family. Even in death he still considers Lazarus as no more than a servant to bring him water and to be the messenger for his brothers. He also reveals that he knows Lazarus by name yet did not help him as he lay at his gate each day. Thus, the rich man cannot claim ignorance of Lazarus or his need. He incriminates himself by every statement and attitude revealed in the afterlife." [1]

The name Lazarus means "God comes to help." What the rich man fails to recognize is that God comes to help *him* by sending Lazarus to his doorstep. As Cardinal Schönborn observes, "(God) helps rich people through the poor that their hearts may not be hardened." [2] The poor are not obstacles; they are God's gift to us, opportunities for our salvation.

The prophet Amos condemns the people of Israel for their complacency—not for sins of commission, things they actively did wrong, but for sins of omission, the good they failed to do. The Oxford dictionary defines complacency as “uncritical satisfaction with oneself or one’s achievements.” That is exactly the condition of the rich man, and it is exactly what Jesus warns us against.

By contrast, St. Paul exhorts Timothy: “Compete well for the faith.” The Greek is even stronger: “fight the good fight.” The word conjures up the image of an athlete straining every muscle, or a soldier locked in battle. The Christian life requires discipline, endurance, and sacrifice. Faith is not a spectator sport. It demands action, commitment, and struggle. And here we circle back to those WWII soldiers: what sustained many of them in their darkest nights was the hope of reunion with their loved ones. They fought on not simply out of duty, but because of relationship. They endured the fight for the sake of those they loved.

So it is with us. Our fight of faith is not for a fading crown or a medal that will gather dust, but for eternal communion with the God who made us for himself. The “good fight” of the Christian is a battle to stay faithful, to resist complacency, to love God and our neighbor, to keep our hearts open to the Lazarus at our door.

So perhaps this week we can ask God for the grace to recognize where he is calling us to practice our faith more actively, more ardently. Who is the Lazarus at my gate? Who is the person God has sent to help soften my heart and draw me closer to him?

Jesus tells us this parable not to frighten us but to awaken us. The only way to overcome the anguish of separation is to live with open hands and open hearts now—sharing with Lazarus at our door, so that one day we may share forever in the joy of God’s kingdom.

[1] Daniel H. Mueggenborg, *Come Follow Me: Discipleship Reflections on the Sunday Gospel Readings for Liturgical Year C*, 2nd ed. (Herefordshire, UK: Gracewing, 2020), 347.

[2] Christoph Cardinal Schönborn, *Jesus the Divine Physician: Encountering Christ in the Gospel of Luke*, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 135.