

*What Do We Do With Jesus?*

Jason Boyd; September 26, 2010

Kirkland Congregational Church; Kirkland, WA

Luke 16:19-31

I'm really excited for something that is coming Monday of next week. I'm heading over to Yakima for a 2-day sojourn with John Dominic Crossan, one of my favorite theologians. This is the Turner Memorial Lecture Series that the Disciples of Christ annually sponsors. Crossan may be a name that is familiar to a few of you – if you went to any of the Living the Questions adult education programs that Ben has done in recent years, you likely know the name and perhaps the face.

You may have also read some of Crossan's books – if not, I'd highly recommend that you do. You can even listen to one of them in your car just by stopping in the Helliwell Room and borrowing his book "The Last Week" on CD – this book focuses on the last week of Jesus' life and explores a variety of things that we often don't hear about, even in seminary depending on what seminary one attended. There are things I learned from Crossan that I didn't know – such as the procession into Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday was also a counter to a Roman military procession taking place. The Romans, it seems, always did that on major Jewish holidays, just to provide a show of strength and maintain their system of domination. Jesus knew full well he was saying to the world that here's an alternative to Rome, to that system of domination. Jesus was being – gasp! – *political*.

It wouldn't have been the first time he did that, of course. Thanks to Augustus Caesar, Roman coinage bore the words "Son of God" – declaring that the Emperor of Rome was in fact, the son of God. As we well remember, Jesus had something to say about that. Referring to Jesus as the Son of God was not just a theological statement, but it was also a political one ... an intensely political one at that.

And so we come to the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. It's a great parable, so much can be told from it. Maybe I'll even get to hear John Dominic Crossan talk about it someday. But in the meantime let's just dive into it on our own. In this parable does Jesus make a statement about wealth and poverty? Yes. Does Jesus make a statement about privilege? Yes. Does Jesus make a statement about hunger? Yes. Does Jesus make a statement about what gods we worship, as in the idolatry of worshipping riches and worshipping money? You bet. There are so many ways we can go with this parable – and since it shows up in the lectionary every 3 years, you'll get to hear it again in 2013.

But I want to go to a certain place in the text. Both the rich man and Lazarus had died. The rich man found himself in Hades, and found himself able to see that Lazarus was up in heaven at the side of Abraham. What is the first thing he does? Asks that Lazarus be sent to relieve his agony. Abraham says no, and the rich man then asks that Lazarus be sent to go warn his brothers.

Now if you think about the rich man, it's understandable that he wants his agony relieved. And it's understandable that he wants his family to escape his fate. But here's what is appalling – and I want you to think about this. Even in death, he felt that someone like Lazarus was there to serve him. To be *his* servant, to take care of *his* needs. Even in death.

This man lived his life without a care in the world, including without caring at all for the plight of people who were starving outside the gates of his own home, and ostensibly felt that folks like Lazarus were there to serve him and his wants in life. And in death. In death.

This past week the combination of an item from the news and a letter I received here at the church really made me think of this, on a much larger scale. We are sadly aware that the economy is far from what we'd like it to be, that budget cuts are wreaking havoc in many places. The news item was this -- last Tuesday, King County Executive Dow Constantine announced that in light of the ongoing economic problems, all general fund support for human services would be eliminated from the county budget. All.

And then the letter came to me from the Church of Mary Magdalene, a Christian ministry for homeless women in Seattle. If you've heard of Mary's Place, a site where abused women can find shelter from their abusers, keep their kids safe, etc., that's part of the church of Mary Magdalene. Our Women's Fellowship gives to them each year. In a civil and calm way, the letter pointed to desperation -- they're out of money. Without funding, they have to turn people away, people with nowhere to go to shelter themselves and their kids from abuses spouses. They are facing the same kind of need that lots of organizations are facing -- and while they are not a governmental organization, groups who perform similar functions which do receive aid from King County or the state or what not are in the same spot.

It puts us in this fascinating position -- support for organizations that help those in need is declining at just the time where the same economy which is causing that support to decline is also causing the need for the services that those organizations to provide to increase. And who gets hit by it? The Lazaruses of our world. Granted, the way things are cause suffering on a large scale, but it's the poor, the downtrodden, the hungry, the abused, the folks that are invisible to many and the folks who those like the rich man in our text would prefer remain invisible bear the brunt of it.

Now please know, in this particular instance we are doing something. The Board of Directors voted on Wednesday night to give whatever monetary donations we receive from the November 13<sup>th</sup> recycling event to the Church of Mary Magdalene. But we all know that the situation is deeper than that.

The Roman Empire in which Jesus arrived was one that practiced this system of domination very well. Every Roman Emperor who wanted to build magnificent monuments to himself did so on the backs of the poor. The need for a Colosseum took precedence over the need to eat. The need for wealthy landowners to remain wealthy took precedence over the need of poor peasants to feed their families. The system has modernized itself in 2000 years, but similarities remain.

Tuesday night we'll be hearing from Alice Woldt of the Washington Association of Churches, as she talks with us about Initiative 1098. I don't know what she'll say, and how you vote on this is up to you, but I will say this -- a system that in which, if Juan Carlos and I were making \$400,000 annually, I could complain about having to pay a little more of it knowing full well we could afford it without even noticing it, and that those complaints would be given more legitimacy than the cries from all those in Lazarus-like positions with this astounding need for food for the hungry, shelter for the homeless, safety for the abused, education for all the kids, etc., is a sick, sick system. It's a system that not only ignores Lazarus, it's a system that creates Lazarus after Lazarus after Lazarus. And one which would make me the rich man in the parable. This parable is being lived out by the system in which we are living.

Abraham said to that rich man in the parable, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." Let it not be lost on us that the one the one who told the parable did rise from the dead. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> day. We ought to be convinced by him. We ought to be convinced that in Luke 4, when Jesus first preached and He told them in the temple that the Spirit

of the Lord was upon him because he had been anointed to bring good news to the poor, he probably meant that. We ought to remember that when he spoke in Matthew 25 and spoke of giving food when he was hungry, drink when he was thirsty, and ended his words with, *“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me,”* he probably meant that too.

As a progressive church, we do run risks. When you seek to truly follow Jesus, there is always a risk. Accepting a call to ministry is always a risk. Progressive churches get accused of being political, and who knows, maybe I’m going to hear it about this sermon. But here’s the thing – did you ever notice how that happens only when you’re trying to change the system? I don’t know of any churches which supported slavery or just pitifully stood idly by during slavery which were told they were being political. To my memory, it was the churches who took part in the Civil Rights Movement who were told they were being political; churches which supported segregation or did nothing were not told they were being political. So shouldn’t it strike us as odd that those which sought to maintain a system of segregation could actually make such a charge? At the very least, that should inform us of what is really meant when that charge of “being political” is made.

There’s this story of a man who saw someone drowning in the river, so he went in and saved him. Then he saw another one, so he saved him. And another, and another, and another. Eventually, he realized that at some point he needed to get upriver to see who was throwing all these people in the river in the first place, find out why, and put it to a stop. That’s what we’re called to do. When people are hungry, it’s our job to get them food, yes – but it’s also our job to figure out why people are hungry in the first place, how a system that allows there to be hunger got there in the first place, who benefits from that system, and put it to a stop. Whenever there is a system that allows people to suffer, it’s our job to find out who benefits and to work to stop that system. That’s God’s justice. That’s the justice the prophets spoke of, that’s the justice Jesus spoke of.

Jesus called us to work for justice not just when it’s easy, but when it’s difficult. Not just when it’s something internal to the church, but when it’s external. If we’re fearful of this, what, then, do you do with the Kirkland Congregational Church that hosted Tent City? What, then, do you do with Martin Luther King? What, then, do you do with the Bible, with its more than 2,000 admonitions from God on the treatment of the poor?

And what, then, do you do with Jesus? Shall he be criticized as being political for saying to the Roman Empire that the only Son of God is the actual Son of the actual God? For daring to challenge a system of domination and oppression? For Palm Sunday – when he quite clearly entered Jerusalem to counter the Roman military procession, to say to the people, there is another way – God’s way? If we’re afraid of that, if we resist that, if our concern that someone might label us as political allows us **not** to act for justice wherever there is injustice, political or social or economic or whatever, then we must ask ourselves the question. What do we do with Jesus?

Amen.