

Loving Lazaruses for the Sake of Paradise
Fr. Hector Firoglanis – Sunday, November 1, 2020

Although we live in the wealthiest and most powerful country in the world, there's a lot of unrest and animosity in our country today. Of course, a lot of that has to do with a contentious election coming up on Tuesday, but the hostile political climate is more a symptom of our spiritual poverty. The root of our problems is not political, but spiritual, having more to do with people forgetting God, allowing our hearts to grow cold, and watering down our love into an abstract idea.

In today's powerful Epistle and Gospel readings, we learn that love is not a hypothetical idea, but a tangible way of life that creates bridges of healing and salvation. We learn that all people, rich and poor, are mutually dependent, as St. John Chrysostom says: **"The rich exist for the sake of the poor; the poor exist for the salvation of the rich."**

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The rich man in today's Gospel reading is not someone we would consider – by the world's standards – a cruel or unjust man. His depiction in Christ's parable shows us, as Archbishop Anastasios says, that **"The opposite of love is not hate, but ego."** The rich man did not hate poor Lazarus. He simply didn't notice him because he was preoccupied with himself and his own life of comfort and luxury.

But as we read at the end of the Parable, the rich man ends up in hell, utterly nameless and forgotten, while Lazarus is in Paradise comforted in the bosom of Abraham and remembered by name.

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My brothers and sisters: let us not deceive ourselves. We are all, to varying degrees, the rich man in today's Gospel reading. Just like the rich man, God sends "Lazaruses" to all of us, if we would only stop to notice them. They are the vulnerable, the helpless, and the utterly nameless men, women, and children in the vast sea of suffering in our world, our cities, and in our neighborhoods.

Who are these nameless neighbors suffering all around us?

- They are the more than 50 million people, including a potential of 17 million children, who will experience food insecurity in the United States due to the effects of the coronavirus pandemic (Feeding America).
- They are the 26 million refugees worldwide, less than one percent of which will be legally admitted into the United States this year (National Immigration Forum).
- They are the nearly one million unborn babies who are surgically aborted each year in the United States (CDC.gov).

Many will passionately vote this Tuesday based on their moral concern for the immigration crisis at the border or their moral opposition to abortion. On a spiritual level, however, I often wonder why that passion and outrage over distant social injustices does not translate into concrete actions of love on the local level.

How many people who will vote this Tuesday know the name of even one refugee family seeking to settle in our country? Or how many know the name of just one woman who is pregnant, alone, and scared to bring a baby into the world without a support system?

How many Lancaster Democrats, who rightly express concern for the border refugee crisis, will volunteer their time and resources at the *Church World Service* office in Lancaster to provide hope and a home for refugees and immigrants here in Lancaster County?

Or how many Lancaster Republicans who are rightly appalled by abortion will volunteer their time and resources at *A Woman's Concern* center, just a block from our church, which empowers women, men, and families with the resources and support to make choices for the life of unborn babies.

I don't mean to minimize the importance of elections in our democracy, but ultimately, the outcome of Tuesday's election is not the most important thing which should be weighing on our minds and hearts right now. As Orthodox Christians, we are called to put our trust in God and minister to the Lazaruses of our world with concrete actions of love, while learning their names and their stories.

Political parties have money and power, but they do not have love. Governments cannot save the world; only Love can do that.

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And in today's Scripture reading from the Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians, we learn about the divine love that we are called to have and cultivate in our lives.

St. Paul writes: **"If I give away all I have to the poor, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends."**

This love of Christ, defined by St. Paul and lived by our Saints throughout the centuries, is not just an idea; it is the way of prayer and action that **rescues the poor from a living hell in this life, and saves the rich from the eternal hell in the next life.**

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I'd like to share with you a story from our Annunciation Food Box distribution two weeks ago. While our beloved volunteers were giving out food boxes and engaging with our wonderful neighbors, a young man asked to see a priest.

His name was Jose, 31 years old, and the father of six children – around the same ages as my own children. He was visibly in a lot of pain and shared that he had been diagnosed with terminal cancer, and that he was scared to die and leave behind his children without a father. I prayed over him, anointed him with holy oil, and encouraged him to keep his faith in God no matter what. We gave him two food boxes for his family's material needs, but most importantly we learned his name and we pray for him at every Paraklesis service.

This coming Thursday we will have our first Food Box ministry where we will be distributing boxes from Blessings of Hope. Each box, which has 35-40 pounds of perishable and non-perishable food items, will be purchased for \$7. We will be purchasing 125 boxes to distribute every other week.

We encourage everyone who is able, to participate as a volunteer or as a donor, or both. Each distribution will cost \$875, and the first three distributions have been donated. Please call the church office if you can sponsor a distribution at \$875, a month at \$1,750, or even just one box at \$7 [get your children involved!].

You may also support this ministry through the *Donate A Dinner (D.A.D)* program, or donate extra Bazaar tickets which we will distribute this coming Thursday to families in need.

The more participation and leadership we recruit for this ministry, the more we will be able to expand our philanthropic efforts to help the hungry, the shoe-less, the homeless, the refugees, the uninsured, the unborn, and all the Lazaruses who await our help.

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We all know there is a big election on Tuesday, but we must keep everything in proper perspective. We must never lose sight of the fact that the roots of all our problems lie in the human soul, and our problems can only truly be resolved by transforming the soul.

This is the message of today's Gospel reading: **“The rich exist for the sake of the poor; the poor exist for the salvation of the rich.”**

Let us prioritize our lives accordingly and cultivate a Christ-like love within our souls, for every act of charity alleviates the suffering of the poor in this temporary life, and draws us closer to God and His heavenly kingdom in the life to come. Amen.