

Sermon for March 3, 2019

“Jesus Told Stories That Didn’t Make Sense”

Luke 16:19-31

Staunton Church of the Brethren

Scott L. Duffey, Pastor

Ron Wayne was one of the founders of Apple, along with Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak. He helped to steer the computer company in its early days, and had a hand in designing the famous Apple logo. Wayne owned 10 percent of the company, while Jobs and Wozniak each owned 45 percent. But Wayne decided to hand back his stake, fearing that he would be liable for a portion of a \$15,000 loan if the company went under. Apple succeeded, of course, and if Wayne had held on to his stake it would now be worth more than \$37 billion.

Does he have any regrets? Surprisingly, no. "I made my decision on the information I had at the time," he said. "I've got my health, my family and integrity -- and that is the best fortune you could ask for." Do you believe him? Thirty-seven BILLION dollars -- and NO regrets? Hmmmm.

Jesus tells the story of a rich man who was "dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day" (Luke 16:19). The man died, was buried and found himself in Hades being tormented (vv. 22-23). Did he have any regrets? Jesus implies that he did. But none of his regrets involved poor business decisions or missed opportunities to make money. He did not say, "I should have held on to my 10 percent stake in that apple orchard!" In fact, he had led the life that he was told was the right one. Be somebody, raise your income, take care of yourself, with wealth comes power, and with power comes influence. That's what most people believed, even those who didn't have anything. It was those with the influence, the power, and the wealth that deserved respect and more good fortune. Those without it were to be pitied, looked down upon, judged as lazy, weak, and even less than human. That's what the people in Jesus' audience would have expected him to say, but then he'd tell a story that didn't

make sense. Like the rich man and Lazarus. How in the world can Lazarus be the hero here? How is it possible that a rich man can die and not only not have it all, but have regrets?

But yes, the rich man has regrets, though they seem to go in a different direction than we even we might expect, one that matches a trend we see today. A nurse specializing in care of the terminally ill has recorded the most common regrets of the dying, and there's no mention of missed business deals. No regrets about skipped bungee jumping opportunities or even about marriage -- despite the many jokes that link regret to the choice of a mate. Like the one where a woman inserts an ad in the classifieds: "Husband wanted." Next day, she receives a hundred letters. They all say the same thing: "You can have mine."

No, the top five regrets discovered by the nurse include:

5. *I wish that I had let myself be happier.* People admit that they feared change in their lives, so they pretended that they were content. In fact, they wish they had laughed more and allowed themselves to be sillier.

4. *I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends.* People feel badly that they were so caught up in their own lives that they let important friendships slip away.

3. *I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings.* Many people suppress their feelings in order to keep peace with others.

2. *I wish I hadn't worked so hard.* This regret was expressed by every male patient. Every single one of them.

And the number one big regret, discovered by nurse Bonnie Ware and reported in *The Guardian* (February 1, 2012):

1. *I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.* This is the most common regret of all. "Most people had not honored even a half of their dreams," says Ware, "and had to die knowing that it was due to choices they had made, or not made."

Do these big regrets ring true? What would you regret if this were your last day on earth? Jesus tells us that the rich man was not alone in his life and his death. "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" (vv. 20-21). Lazarus

may have had some regrets, but they probably did not include number 5: *I wish that I had let myself be happier*. The life of Lazarus was, in the words of philosopher Thomas Hobbes, "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short" (*Leviathan*, XIII.9). For Lazarus, happiness was not a choice. It was a scrap from the rich man's table, which never came.

Jesus tells us that "the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried" (v. 22). And there, in Hades, we begin to get a sense of the rich man's regrets.

Regret Number 1. *I wish that I had cared for the people around me*. The poor man Lazarus was lying at his gate, covered with sores and the rich man stepped over or around him each time he left his home. Every single day, the rich man missed a chance to help Lazarus by simply giving him the leftovers from his table.

Regret Number 2. *I wish that I had listened to Moses and the prophets*. The rich man realizes in death that he had not paid attention to the word of God as it came through Moses, "you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18). He had not heeded the prophet Isaiah, who commanded, "share your bread with the hungry ... bring the homeless poor into your house" (Isaiah 58:7).

Regret Number 3. *I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me*. Every day, the rich man ignored poor Lazarus, fully aware of the teachings of Moses and the prophets. But he didn't have the courage to live a life of integrity, one in which his actions were in line with what he observed and what he believed.

The rich man saw the poor man and knew that Moses and the prophets commanded him to help. But he did not. The rich man fell into a trap set by people who blamed Lazarus for his own poverty, insisting that he must be lazy or morally deficient. Sitting around the rich man's table, they would say, "God rewards goodness and punishes wickedness -- it's always been that way! So dress lavishly and eat sumptuously. You deserve it!" I think it's interesting that Dave Ramsey, the financial guru on the radio, when asked "how are you today?" he always says "better than I deserve."

In Hades, the rich man felt a big regret. He said to Abraham, "I beg you to send [Lazarus] 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" (Luke 16:27-28). The rich man cared deeply for his brothers; he was not a man without feelings. But Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them" (v. 29). Yes, that's right, the rich man realized. But Moses and the prophets had not been enough for him. "No, father Abraham," he pleaded; "but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent" (v. 30). Surely they will turn their lives around if dead Lazarus comes back to life and warns them!

Shaking his head, Abraham says, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead" (v. 31). You know that Abraham is talking to us, right along with the rich man and his brothers. Are we convinced? Are we persuaded to change our ways if someone actually rises from the dead? Jesus has risen, but we still have regrets.

Now, let's be clear: None of us is perfect, and we will all come to the end of life feeling that we have made mistakes along the way. There are choices we feel badly about, alongside opportunities we wish we had seized. But what would it mean for us to die with *no big regrets*?

The top regrets of the rich man can teach us the lessons that we -- like his five brothers - - need to learn. We don't want to arrive at our deathbed saying:

*I wish that I had cared for the people around me.*

*I wish that I had listened to Moses, the prophets and Jesus.*

*I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, in which my actions were in line with my beliefs.*

We are not yet in the afterlife, calling out to Father Abraham. We are not stuck in a place of regretting that we did not do enough, that we did not do more, that we did not choose wisely, that we did not have enough time. As long as we are breathing, we can choose to care for the people around us, we can continue to discern the teachings of the Bible, and live a life that is true to our deepest convictions. If we do, we'll have no big regrets.

Choices do not have to be large to be life-changing. The rich man could have simply shared some of his food with Lazarus in order to care for the people around him. In the same way, hunger in America, for example, which cannot be eliminated without broad institutional initiatives, such as school breakfast and lunch programs, must also be addressed on a personal and relational level. Community food banks and hot meals for the homeless function in this way, bringing together the haves and the have-nots, in places where relationships can develop. We participated in a great sharing event in January with our Food Bank Benefit Concert, but it can't stop there. Hunger in America might not be eliminated without government intervention, but the hungry person or persons in our community can be fed, a sandwich at a time. I'm sure there's more we can do, without the judgement we so often attach to it.

Putting our actions in line with our beliefs -- living a life of integrity -- is a change that is made one choice at a time. The result is a life you won't regret.