

## Wesley United Methodist Church

September 25, 2016

“Living in Denial.”

Luke 16:19-31

Living in denial is a favorite occupation of many people. Some people would simply prefer not to face reality. Reality is stressful. If we could turn a blind eye to it, life would be so much easier.

Our story today is about a man who had learned to do just that. You know the story well.

Read Luke 16:19-31

Let us focus on those words: “...they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”

Some people live in denial. Even if someone rises from the dead, they will not change their minds.

It's amazing how easy it is for us to see denial in others. We see the young woman in love with a scoundrel. Can't she see where this relationship is leading? Or does she not want to see? We see the middle-aged man not taking care of his body. Can't he see what he is doing to himself? Sometimes we get frustrated if it's someone we love. We want to grab them and shake them into reality. Don't you know that, if you do not get help for this problem, you are going to wreck your life? Denial. There are many possibilities for living in denial. Some of them are suggested by this story that Jesus told.

Let's begin here. We are living in denial if we believe that casual Christianity is a viable choice. Casual Christianity. It's a comfortable place to be. Eternal life with few demands. Forgiveness without true repentance. Respectability with few responsibilities. It's a nice lifestyle. The only problem is that it is an illusion. Our commitment as Christians is a poor imitation of the real thing. Oh, in our mind, we make excuses.

You may be familiar with the story of some GIs who were on furlough. A commanding officer was furious when nine of them failed to show up for morning roll call. The first man didn't straggle in until 7:00 p.m.

“I'm sorry sir,” the soldier explained, “but I had a date and lost track of time, and I missed the bus back. However, being determined to get in on time, I hired a cab. Halfway here, the cab broke down. I went to a farmhouse and persuaded the farmer to sell me a horse. I was riding to camp when the animal fell over dead. I walked the last ten miles, and just got here.”

Though skeptical, the commanding officer let the GI off with a reprimand. However, after him seven other stragglers in a row came in with the same exact story: had a date, missed the bus, hired a cab, bought a horse, it died, etc. By the time the ninth man reported in, the colonel had, of course, grown weary of it. With a great deal of impatience, he asked, “What happened to you?” “Sir,” the GI said, “I had a date and missed the bus back so I hired a cab.” “Wait,” the colonel yelled at him, “don't tell me the cab broke down.” “No, sir,” the soldier said, “The cab didn't break down. There just too many dead horses in the road and we had trouble getting through.” As they say, one excuse is about as good as another for letting our commitment to Christ be a low priority in our lives.

The rich man in Jesus' story was an expert at this. Lazarus lay right outside his door and chances are he never saw him. Oh, maybe at first. But soon he was able to shut the desperate man out of his visual field and his mind. The poor beggar was an inconvenient nuisance that the rich man could ignore.

It's amazing how easy that is to do. We don't have beggars lying outside our houses, but that doesn't mean we don't have neighbors who have needs. We don't have to survey our community, we know we will find people with heartbreaking needs. People grieving over a dying mother or father, people struggling with a son's or daughter's addiction, people with a ton of guilt. Sometimes all they need is a word of encouragement, an invitation to worship, a chance to express their grief. But we don't even know them. We can live blissfully in our own little world and pretend that Jesus didn't say anything about being a good neighbor, about being sensitive to people who have special needs. But he did, and because he did, we may need to take stock of our lives.

Many of you know that I grew up in a small town in Germany and as a youth when I was allowed to be out at night, I had a neighbor who always sat by his window and looked out. Later in years I was informed by his wife that he watched for me to get home safely before he went to bed. I know that was fifty years ago in another world, but isn't it wonderful having a neighbor like that, or being a neighbor like that. This part of town and many others have neighborhood watch areas. My next-door-neighbors keep an eye on my place here in town. Making sure that I am okay when I am there. We could be living in denial. It's so much easier.

One of the saddest things of our time is how hard-hearted many Christians have become to the people at the bottom of society. I know the poor aren't easy to love. Some of them have the problems they have because they have been irresponsible. Many of them will not help themselves. Many of them have gotten to the point where they are powerless to help themselves. So we ignore them. We try to shut them out. There once was a time when a Christian would look at

someone in that condition and whisper, "There, for the grace of God, go I," and lend a helping hand. We're not asked to judge, we're asked to love. But like the rich man who ignored Lazarus, many of us have built up a system of rationalizations that make the poor responsible for their own redemption. Besides, there are just too many cons out there and sorting them out is too much trouble.

We are like Bobby and Billy, two brothers, who were assigned the responsibility of mowing the lawn and trimming the hedges while their parents were out. When the parents returned, nothing had been done. Dad was very upset. He asked Bobby, "What have you been doing while we were gone?" Bobby replied in a low voice, "Nothing." Dad turns to Billy and asks, "What have you been doing?" Billy replied, "Helping Bobby."

Maybe we can make it work. We can start right here in our little corner of the world. Do you know everyone here in this sanctuary? And if you do, do you know their sadness, their pain, their needs? Or, maybe we can continue to be casual in our commitment to Christ. Maybe we can continue to live in our own little world and ignore our neighbors. Maybe Jesus didn't mean it when he said, "When you did it not to the least of these, you did it not to me." But I doubt it. We have a choice, denial or discipleship.

Father Abraham says sadly to the rich man who pleads on behalf of his brothers: "...they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." How about you? Are you convinced? Does it make a difference in how we live?