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Steven C. Bahls
Augustana College

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Who is Your Lazarus? | Augustana College

St. John's Lutheran Church, Des Moines, Iowa, September 26, 2004

Steven C. Bahls, President of Augustana College

Most of us are familiar with the story Jesus told about the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31. The rich man sits in his opulent house, dressed in the finest clothes, eating the finest food. He's totally oblivious of the beggar, Lazarus, lying at this gate, covered in sores and longing to eat even the scraps that fell from the rich man's table. And when they both die, the rich man suffers in hell while Lazarus is comforted at Abraham's side. The rich man begs Abraham to send Lazarus across the void with at least a drink of water, but Abraham says that's impossible. Nor will Abraham send Lazarus to warn the rich man's brothers, because all the warning they need is already in the Scriptures-which they refuse to heed.

When I was asked to preach on this scripture, I almost asked to preach a different week on a different scripture. This story makes me feel uncomfortable. But I am fond of telling my students they need to get out of their comfort zone. So here I go, heading outside of my comfort zone. Does this scripture make you feel uncomfortable? Most of us have been blessed with more money than we need to meet our basic needs. We have, by world standards, been blessed with abundant riches. The story of Lazarus prods me to wonder if I am the man dressed in purple and fine linen, living in luxury. Am I one of the rich people Jesus refers to? I think I am, and I think most of you are. If so, we should wonder who is the Lazarus in our lives. Is Lazarus the woman who cleans the buildings we work in? The homeless man in our community? The child from an abusive or neglectful home? One of the people working for 35 cents an hour in Southeast Asia sewing our clothing or assembling our VCRs?

In thinking about today's scriptures, I thought about a convocation we held at Augustana College earlier this month for our students. For me, this convocation was the high point of the year so far. We invited back five recent graduates who spoke about their decisions to pursue lives of service, even when it meant giving up financial rewards. I'm constantly surprised by how much I can learn from our students and recent grads-more, I think, than they learn from me. These recent grads each explained their process of vocational reflection - how they linked their gifts, passions and talents to the needs of the world.

One was Lindsay Daniels, class of 2003. She's an Iowa girl, from Waverly. She was active in almost all aspects of the college: president of the student government association, a leader in her sorority, a member of the homecoming committee, and the student representative to the board of trustees. As such an active, bright student, she was in a great position to have her pick of jobs. But something was missing. She wanted to serve. To Lindsay, the traditional careers didn't seem right. As a Spanish major, she had developed a compassion for the Latino community. So she signed up with Lutheran Volunteer Corps and was placed with La Raza, an advocacy organization for Latinos located in the heart of Washington, DC. She is paid a stipend of \$100 a

month. No doubt her parents said, "Will your neighborhood be safe? What about medical insurance? What about transportation? How can you live on \$100 per month?" Lindsay decided she would have to live simply. She is now a paid staff member at La Raza, but continuing to live simply. She had asked who Lazarus was in her life, and the answer was today's most recent large immigrant group, Latino Americans. When speaking to our current students at convocation, she told us how, despite her vow to live simply, she is leading a rich life. She is privileged to serve others.

Others spoke as well. One was Eric Rowell, an Augustana basketball star, who graduated from the College in 1993. He, like Lindsey, would have had many financially rewarding opportunities upon graduation from Augustana. He gave up both the opportunity for a good salary and the opportunity for a comfortable life. As an African-American growing up on the South Side of Chicago, basketball was his hope. It gave him pride and taught him about discipline. When he graduated from college, something was incomplete. He had a burning desire to serve - but he wanted a way to serve with a basketball. Eric went to India with the YMCA to teach young, impoverished teens about basketball - and the teamwork, discipline and dedication associated with it. His supervisor back in the United States told him it would not be easy. It wasn't, but he was enriched beyond his wildest expectations. Eric asked who Lazarus was in his life, and he learned it was the impoverished youth of India.

Or consider Elizabeth Lowenthal Hafkin, a 1995 graduate of the College. Listen to what she recent wrote about her job opportunities upon graduation from medical school. She tells about how she decided to reject the work of a traditional doctor and go to Africa to care for HIV-infected children. Listen to her words:

The contract for the new job that I planned to take in Philadelphia arrived. Feeling unable to sign it just yet, I left it on the table, among my many journals and articles on International Health and Pediatric AIDS...Ours was to become a different kind of sacrifice- one that feels more like an honor and a privilege- fighting on the front-lines of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa. I provide care for the children while Jeffrey cares for their parents. With appropriate use of modern antiretroviral therapies, we see people transformed from the brink of death to become healthy, happy and productive.

My years at Augustana provided me with a solid foundation that allowed me to succeed in medical school and in my career as a pediatrician As a rare Jewish student at traditionally-Christian Augustana, I deepened in my faith through discussions with others. In a world that so often divides well-intentioned individuals based on differing beliefs, I learned that there is truth in the unity of good works and hope for a better world. Elizabeth Lowenthal found her Lazarus, the HIV-infected infants of Africa, and she did something about it. She was enriched in her faith because of it.

There are countless other examples. Higher education should challenge students to find their Lazarus. In particular, Lutheran higher education should do so. And it does. Only 33% of college freshman at Augustana come to college wanting to influence social values. That number more than doubles by the time they are seniors, to 68%. Fifty-four percent of our first-year students want to help others in difficulty, but that percentage increases to 84% by the time they are seniors. College students at Lutheran colleges are, by the time they graduate, passionate about contributing to racial understanding. Only 22 percent of first-year students have the

objective of helping promote racial understanding. That percentage nearly triples by their senior year. Colleges, particularly Lutheran colleges, help young people to identify who their Lazarus is and respond accordingly. And they want to be leaders in doing so. Twenty-seven percent of our first-year students want to be community leaders. By the time they graduate, that figure increases by 35 percentage points to 63 percent. These are remarkable increases.

How do we do it? By helping students grow in body, mind and spirit, and by encouraging our students to be active listeners in hearing their calling. We also do it by encouraging our students to look into the community to see Lazarus. But in wanting to help Lazarus, do college students lose interest in being dressed in purple and fine linen and living in luxury? Believe it or not, they do. When students arrive at Augustana, 68 percent say they consider it a priority to be very well off financially. By the time they graduate, that figure has dropped appreciably to 59 percent.

Did the scriptures for today and these stories about recent college graduates move you to think about who Lazarus is in your community? It certainly has motivated us at Augustana. For our college, Lazarus might be the scores of employees keeping our campus clean, serving meals to our students and maintaining the physical plant for that slice of God's creation that we call the campus. Scriptures like these inspire us to resist contracting out our services to firms that pay minimum wage with no benefits. We are called to pay a "living wage" to each and every full-time employee. Likewise, for Augustana College Lazarus might be the people in Bangladesh sewing the t-shirts and sweatshirts we sell in our bookstore. That's why we buy college wear only from companies certified by the Fair Labor Association to provide decent and fair labor conditions.

Looking for Lazarus is part of the process of vocational reflection. At Augustana, we have collected a set of essays from our alumni about their vocational path and have posted hundreds of them on our website, under the Center for Vocational Reflection. What is striking to me about these essays is that vocational reflection for most is a lifelong process. For most, the journey is not a straight line, but a winding road. Often there are sharp and unanticipated turns.

When was the last time you engaged in thoughtful vocational reflection? When was the last time you were systematic in thinking about your gifts, passions, and talents and linking them to the needs of our world? Perhaps, like too many college students, you have thought more about what you want to be than you have about who you want to be.

Thinking about who you want to be entails thinking about how God calls you to relate to others-not only your family, friends and coworkers, but those who lie suffering just outside your gate. Who is your Lazarus? Is Lazarus at work, near your home, across an ocean, or in this church? What can you do to start to match the courage of these young adults I described?

When you find your Lazarus, must you drop everything and vow to live on \$100 a month, volunteer in India or take a job in Africa? For some the answer may be yes, but for most the answer is no. For those of us older than Lindsey, Eric and Elizabeth, the way we think about vocation might be different. Lindsey, Eric and Elizabeth had the blessings of youth, idealism and freedom from responsibility to care for family members. Not all of us are in

our twenties and many of us have obligations to others that tie us to where we are. But most of us have been blessed with something that Lindsey, Eric and Elizabeth were not blessed with: more money than necessary to meet our basic needs. How can we employ the financial gifts we have been blessed with to meet the needs of those around us?

The gift of having sufficient money to meet our needs and the needs of others is a blessing, but it can be a curse. In his first letter to Timothy, Paul cautions us to guard against arrogance and not to put hope in wealth. The scriptures challenge us to be rich in good deeds and be generous and willing to share. I submit that for those of us blessed with wealth, our wealth is a gift to be employed in our vocational calling. It is not a gift to be hoarded.

Paul reminded Timothy that wealth can cause us to be "pierced with many griefs." This is a serious risk, and we need to be vigilant about it. About this time last year I read a book that I can't stop thinking about. Written by Bethany McLean and Peter Elkin, it's called *The Smartest Guys in the Room: The Amazing Rise and Scandalous Fall of Enron*. The demise of Enron is a story of incredible wealth, greed and arrogance. What I have to say about this book, however, may surprise you. Many of those Enron executives we see on T.V. in handcuffs were, in most respects, good Christians. Most were loving spouses, fiercely devoted to their families. They were active in community improvement. Some were scoutmasters and soccer coaches. They were regarded as role models and community leaders. What happened?

They became arrogant. They were corrupted by greed at Enron, such that they developed two sets of values - one for home and one for work. They failed to engage in continuing vocational reflection. Typically they started at Enron with the admirable goals of serving their community, serving society by creating jobs and streamlining how energy was distributed and marketed in the United States and other parts of the world. But when they generated abundant riches, they did not ask how this wealth could serve others. They did not treat wealth as a gift from God to be used in their vocation. They stopped looking for Lazarus. They did not see Lazarus in the thousands of California householders who could not pay their energy bills because of Enron's manipulation of the markets. They did not see Lazarus in the employees they squashed after they asked tough questions about the business. They did not see Lazarus in their retirees who lost most of their pensions because their greed drove Enron into the ground. As such, many wandered from the faith, and they were pierced with many griefs. In the words of I Timothy, they fell into temptation and a trap, and they plunged into ruin and destruction.

Those of us with more wealth than necessary for our basic needs are at risk of becoming arrogant and oblivious. How do we guard against the risk? By doing what Lindsey, Eric and Elizabeth did, which is taking money out of the equation. We should be deliberate in reflecting on our calling, and on how we can use the money we have to love the Lazarus of the world. The first priority for Christians, of course, is generous support of our church. (What a wonderful urban ministry you have invested in here at St. John's!) Beyond that, you might use the gift of wealth to support organizations that directly minister to the needy. Or you might commit to strengthen your community and the institutions of the community that provide jobs, education and opportunities to those in need. Or you might invest in facilitating systemic change to better provide for the less fortunate.

If we are successful, this will be a world where we sit across the table from Lazarus - a world committed to

social and economic justice, where we all do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God



Accounting	Communication Studies	Geography	Music	Pre-Optometry
Africana Studies	Computer Science	Geology	Music Education	Pre-Pharmacy
Anthropology	Creative Writing	German Studies	Music Performance	Pre-Physical Therapy
Art	Economics	Greek	Neuroscience	Pre-Physician Assistant
Art History	Elementary Education	Graphic Design	Non-Profit Leadership	Pre-Seminary
Asian Studies	Engineering	History	Development	Pre-Veterinary Medicine
Biochemistry	Engineering Physics	International Business	Philosophy	Psychology
Biology	English (Literature)	Japanese	Physics	Religion
Business Administration	English (Writing)	Landscape Architecture	Political Science	Scandinavian Studies
Chemistry	Environmental Management	Latin	Pre-Dentistry	Secondary Education
Chinese	& Forestry	Library and Information	Pre-Law	Sociology
Classics	Environmental Studies	Science	Pre-Medicine	Sociology (Social Welfare)
Communication Sciences	Ethics	Mathematics	Pre-Music Therapy	Spanish
& Disorders	French	Multimedia Journalism	Pre-Nursing	Theatre
		& Mass Communication	Pre-Occupational Therapy	Women's & Gender Studies