

“A place for everything, and everything in its place.” They are definitely words to live by when organizing work desks or garage storage. But substitute “everyone” for “everything,” and things get tricky. Because a lot can go wrong when presuming the “place” of another.

Jesus’ parable of an unnamed rich man (later tradition called him Dives) and a poor one named Lazarus is a case in point. As the story opens, the *place* of Lazarus is by the gate of the rich man. It is a demeaning place, where hope consists of whatever table scraps fall his way. It is a place where mercy comes, not from human compassion but from dogs licking his sores. The place of Lazarus is apparently quite agreeable to the rich man. Lazarus at the gate, on the outside looking in, while the place of Dives is at the feast inside. A place for everyone, and everyone in his place, works for Dives. . . until it doesn’t.

Places in the parable undergo radical transformation when death enters the scene. Lazarus finds his place in the bosom of Abraham. Dives finds himself – well, in a Hades of a place. To his credit, the rich man does appeal to Father Abraham for mercy. Except, old habits of everyone in their place die hard for Dives. Send Lazarus, he says, to care for me. Why bother Father Abraham to perform such a menial task when there is Lazarus, the beggar covered with sores, who can finally make himself useful. When that request is denied, Dives makes another ask: send Lazarus to warn my family. Again, the only place Dives sees for Lazarus is to serve his needs.

Dives’ old habit of keeping Lazarus in his place persists. As the parable ends, one might say: there is a place for everyone, and everyone at last is in their place.

For Reflection and Action:

When have you found yourself as one being kept in place; what did that feel like?

When have you have found yourself keeping another in place; what did that feel like?

Where is the good news in this story for you; where is its challenge for you?