

There's Room At The Table: The Rich man and Lazarus

March 10, 2019

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The theme of this Lenten Season is “There’s Room At The Table”. God’s table, our table, the church’s table, the nation’s table. Today’s parable focuses us on issues of wealth and poverty, riches, hunger and health. In her hymn “A Place At The Table,” Shirley Erena Murray offers these words:

For everyone born, a place at the table,
for everyone born, clean water and bread,
a shelter, a space, a safe place for growing,
for everyone born, a star overhead.

In today’s parable Jesus was challenging the prevailing theology of the day about righteousness, wealth and poverty, a theology still popular today. It said, if you are righteous you will be blessed with wealth, health and success. They could cite verses to back it up. So, if you were rich you were being blessed by God, and if you were poor, God was displeased with you. Simple huh? Or not so simple.

Jesus challenged such theology. Earlier in Luke he had said, “Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven.” What? And, “Woe to you who are rich! What? Just a few verses before Jesus had warned about the dangers of wealth and said, “You can’t serve both God and money.” (Though we all try!)

Then the Pharisees piped up. Luke describes them as “lovers of money”, and they scoff at Jesus’ teaching. Scoff!

So, in response to their scoffing he did what he often did in such circumstances: he told a story. This story.

I Scene One: Two Figures

A tableau. Two figures. Here is the first figure: “There once was a rich man who dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day.” Every day! Table cloth, silver place settings, fine wine, fillet mignon with béarnaise sauce. In that day the rich would use their bread as napkins, wiping their hands on it and tossing it aside.

The Bible loves feasts. One writer has called it the “*eatingest* book in the history of the world,” with the possible exception of the *Odessey*. God loves feasts, but not every day, and not in blind oblivion of the poor around us. “For everyone born a place at the table.” God’s feasts are for *everyone*.

Now the second figure: “And at his gate,” which is to say, on the other side of his wall, “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 [street] dogs would come and lick his sores.” In modern terms, he hoped for “trickle-down economics”.

The man’s name was “Lazarus” which means ironically “God helps.” Some probably said, “If God helps *him*, I think I’ll pass.”

The man is not only poor, but also sick. The two often go together. No health care for him— nor for many in our nation today.

Can you visualize the scene with the two men? I can’t help but think of our nation.

Of course the rich man does not even see Lazarus. I remember going to Brazil to teach for a week. In Rio the poor lived in slums, *favellas*, in card board and scrap huts. Right up against the favellas were high walls with large shards of glass implanted in the cement of the top to keep the poor from climbing the walls.

As a seminary student in N.Y. City, I would take a train every week to the wealthy suburbs in Westchester County where I served a Methodist church as a youth minister. The train went right through Harlem. As it passed through

Harlem up went the *Wall Street Journals* and *New York Times*. No one wanted to look at Harlem, at Lazarus. We turn our heads.

One has said of the bravery of a book that it looks away from nothing. Lord, help us not look away. This parable does not look away.

II Scene Two: the Great Reversal

It's like the movie *Trading Places* where Eddie Murphy the homeless man suddenly changes places with Dan Ackroyd, the Wall Street tycoon.

In Jesus' story this is how it happens. They both die. Both. Lazarus probably expected it. The rich man could not have been more surprised.

But a great reversal happens. Lazarus is carried by the angels to "rock his soul in the bosom of Abraham." The rich man is buried and goes to dwell in Hades where he is tormented in the flames.

Now let's be careful, Jesus is not taking a photo of heaven and hell, or constructing a theology of the afterlife. He is telling a story. It is a cautionary tale like Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. A cautionary tale for us and for our nation. It asks, how shall we live?

So Lazarus is in the heavenly places and the rich man in Hades. And there is a great chasm in between

III Scene Three: Dialogue across the gulf.

The rich man in Hades looks up and sees Lazarus whooping it up with Abraham in the place where you want to be! T-bone steaks, baked potatoes heaped with butter and sour cream, Caesar salad, and for dessert mountains of ice-cream (I'm projecting here!) with hot fudge on top. *Now he sees Lazarus!*

The rich man called out "Father Abraham [he still considered himself a child of Abraham], have mercy and send Lazarus to dip his finger in the water, and cool my tongue. I'm in torment". The African-American spiritual puts it to music:

Dip-your-finger-in-the-water-come-and-cool-my-tongue-for-I'm-tormented-in-the-flames...

Abraham now speaks: "My child", [he still regarded the rich man as his child], remember that while you were alive you had the "good things" the good jobs, the good schools, the good streets, the good health-care, while Lazarus suffered the "evil things." But now he is comforted, and you are in torment. (Remember Mary's song about God's reversal of things?)

A black preacher in Harlem once paraphrased Abraham's response: "Listen, son, Lazarus ain't running no more errands for you."

But Abraham has not finished: “Besides this”, he said, there’s a great gulf between us so that no one can get from your side to mine or from my side to yours.” Jesus doesn’t tell us who dug that ditch. But God didn’t dig it. We on earth dig it with our turned heads and tight fists, with our jokes and votes.

IV Last Scene: The Surprising Twist.

The story doesn’t end there. We see a softening in the rich man. He makes a request, not for himself, but for his five brothers back home: “Would you send Lazarus to warn them, so they won’t end up here?”

It is a noble request, and we might have expected a positive response from Father Abraham. But the rich man gets a shocking answer: “They have Moses and the Prophets; *let them listen to them!*”

The rich man made one more try: “No, Father Abraham, but if someone goes to them for the *dead*, they will repent. Abraham responds: if they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone rises from the dead.”

With this last scene, Jesus turns the spotlight away from the rich man and Lazarus to the five brothers, and to us. “You’ve got Moses and the Prophets. Listen to them!

Moses and the Prophets were the two of the three great sections of the Hebrew Bible, Jesus' Bible: the first five books of the Bible, or the *Torah*, and the *Prophets*. The third great section of the Hebrew Bible was the Writings, books like the Psalms.

What do they say? Someone has counted there are over 2,000 verses in the Bible that concern our care for the poor and vulnerable. In the five books of Moses the most oft-repeated command is to care for the "widows, orphans and strangers" (or immigrants). And there was the provision for the poor called "gleaning": leave parts of your fields unharvested so the poor can come and get food.

And the Prophets? I could quote all day. Archeologists have uncovered in their excavations of Israel at that time show a great disparity between the rich and poor. So we get words from Amos: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream." And these words from Isaiah:

Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes to turn aside the needy from justice and rob the poor of *my people* of their right.

(Isaiah 10:1-2)

The poor are *God's* poor! They belong to God.

And the Writings too. Like Psalm 72:

Give the king your justice, O God...

May he defend the cause of the poor of the people

give deliverance to the needy

and crush the oppressor.

We should paraphrase the passage this way since we live in a democracy:

Give our *democracy* your justice, O God..

May *we* defend the cause of the poor

give deliverance to the needy and crush the oppressor.

And Jesus makes it no easier. He came to the poor of God's people and fed the hungry and healed the sick and said that we and all nations will be judged by how we care for, and here's the list: the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick and imprisoned.

So Jesus says, you have all you need in the scriptures: Listen to them.

Mark Twain was right on target when he said, "It's not the parts of the Bible I *don't* understand that give me trouble; it's the parts of the bible I *do* understand"

Don't wait for some sign or miracle, we have what we need right now.

We're sometimes like the joke about the man who fell over the ledge of a cliff and was hanging on by a root sticking out of the side of the cliff. "Is anyone up there?" he yelled. The voice of God came and said, "There is God, let loose of the root and I'll carry you slowly to the ground." The man yelled out: "Is there anyone *else* up there?"

VI: Us

So what shall we do, you and I? When Albert Schweitzer read this parable he left his life of ease as a professor and musician in Europe and went to Africa and founded a hospital in Lambarene. But we aren't Albert Schweitzer. Where have *you* found your place in this story? What is God calling you—not someone else—to be and to do? And who is the neighbor whom you are being called to love as you love yourself?

Let's start here with the words of Mother Teresa: "*Do small things with great love.*"

Here are some things we can do now: help Grace McDougall with her project of putting together packages of clothes washing materials on second Wednesdays. Help with serving the meals on second Mondays at 5th Street. Join on March 31 for the Rise Up Against Hunger event. It will be great fun for all ages. Give to our Lenten offering for that event. Join in our Good Friday Peace

Walk with First Baptist Garfield Street and see some places and history it is easy to look away from.

How can we dig in more and carry out our mission to the poor through Fifth Street? Who are the people in Statesville whom we can best help because of who we are, with our talents, gifts and spheres of influence? What children of our community can we help? Do we help?

Do not get overwhelmed. Start where you are, not where you're not. I find assurance in these words of God from Deuteronomy:

For this commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you, neither is it too far away. It is not in heaven that you should say, "Who will go to heaven for us and get it for us that we may hear it and observe it?" Neither is it beyond the sea that you should say: "Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us so that we may hear it and observe it". No, the Word is *on your mouth and in your heart so that you can do it.*

This is so true. It is on our lips and in our hearts, and in this room.