

The Rich Man and Lazarus: A Cautionary Tale

Jesus' parables provoke, challenge and inspire. This one does all three. The Rich Man and Lazarus, A Cautionary Tale. Over history it has changed lives and challenged nations. Let's see if we can hear it anew today.

I

The first scene is a tableau, a set piece. Two figures. The first is described in these words: "There once was a rich man who dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day." Every day, linen tablecloth, silver place settings, fine aged wine, filet mignon with bearnaise sauce. A side of asparagus, a stuffed baked potato and Caesar salad. For dessert, cheesecake topped with cherries, or banana foster, your choice, just let the waiter know. Sounds like my kind of meal! He is the quintessential rich guy. His inner toddler is in full swing with the toddler's favorite words: *Mine! More!*

The Bible loves feasts. One has called it, next to Homer's *Odyssey*, "the eatingest book in the history of the world." God loves feasts, our first three parables have been about feasts, but not every day! And not in blind oblivion of the poor around us.

Now the second figure: “And 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, and even the dogs would come and lick his sores.”

Lazarus is the only one named in all of Jesus’ parables. Jesus knew his name. He wants us to know the poor by name, as essential as food. His name means, ironically, “God helps.” Really? But the Bible says over and over again that God comes to the aid of the poor.

The man is not only poor, he is also sick—which is often the case in America. Health care is a biblical issue. He has been brought to the rich man’s door, so he is also disabled. And the dog. The dog who was probably there for the same reason as the poor man, hoping for scraps from the rich man’s table, came and licked his sores. Misery loves company, and this dog may have been some comfort to Lazarus.

I went once to Brazil to teach missionaries at their annual retreat. They took me to see the Brazilian slums, or favelas. There, the poor lived in cardboard and scrap huts, and around the slums were high walls with shards of glass implanted in the cement to keep the poor from climbing over the walls of the favela into the estates of their rich neighbors. I think it is biblically safe to say that God doesn’t want higher walls but longer tables.

The rich man is oblivious to Lazarus' needs. As a seminary student in New York City, I would travel by train on weekends to the wealthy suburbs of Westchester County to serve Armonk Methodist Church as an assistant minister. I embarked from Grand Central Station, and as we passed through Harlem, up went the Wall Street Journals and N.Y. Times. No one wanted to look at Lazarus. The abject poor are hard to look at. Someone said the bravery of a book is that it looks away from nothing. Jesus doesn't look away. How brave are we?

II

The second scene we might call The Great Reversal. It's a little like the movie *Trading Places* where Eddie Murphy the homeless man and Dan Ackroyd the Wall Street Tycoon trade places in life. But in this case the scene shifts to the afterlife. They both die. Both. Lazarus lived with the prospect every day; the rich man could not have been more surprised.

But look! Lazarus is carried by the angels to heaven where he now "rocks his soul in the bosom of Abraham." And the rich man dies, is buried and goes to dwell in Hades where he is in physical torment in the flames.

Note: this is not a photograph of heaven and hell. Jesus was telling a story, one somewhat like those found in other religions and in literature. It is a cautionary tale told to his first century Jewish audience. It's a little like

Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*—we will get to that in a minute- and a story told for us and our nation today.

The poor man is in the heavenly places, the rich man is in Hades, and between them is a great chasm.

III

Which brings us to the third scene. The rich man looks up from Hades and sees Lazarus whooping it up with father Abraham. He sees Lazarus in Abraham's embrace. Picture a sumptuous dinner party in heaven with Lazarus reclining at the table in Abraham's arms as a favored son. *Now The Rich Man Sees Lazarus!*

The rich man called out, "Father Abraham"—he still considered himself a son of Abraham though he lived his life in the opposite ways—"have mercy and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in the water and cool my tongue for I am in torment in these flames!" You may have heard the Black Spiritual setting of this story:

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

Black churches know who they are in this parable, and they enjoy the great reversal.

Abraham now speaks for the first time. “My child”, —*Abraham* still regarded him a child of Abraham even as he broke every commandment of God— “remember that during your lifetime you received the good things— the good schools, the good jobs, the good homes, the good streets, the fine food and good health care, while Lazarus suffered the evil things.” Note that Jesus considered the circumstances of Lazarus’ life an *evil!* But now, Abraham says, “he’s enjoying himself here, and you are in pain.”

Send Lazarus?! Has the man learned anything, still treating Lazarus as an underling? Catholic moral theology has a good description of him: “Invincible ignorance!” A noted black preacher in Harlem once paraphrased Abraham’s response to the man: “Listen, son, Lazarus ain’t running no more errands for you.”

Father Abraham goes on: “Besides this, a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to pass from one side to the other cannot do so.” Here is a sober note of realism: none can pass back and forth between this world and the next—which sets up the next scene.

IV

The last scene has a surprising twist. We see perhaps a softening in the rich man. He asks now on behalf of his five brothers. “Then would you send Lazarus to warn them, so they won’t end up here?”

It's a noble request, and we might have expected a positive response from Abraham. But listen again to what Abraham said: "*They have Moses and the Prophets, let them listen to them!*"

Now we are the five brothers. The Bible of Jesus' first hearers had three parts, like three concentric circles . At the center was the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, personified by Moses. The next circle surrounding it is the Prophets, and the last circle the Writings, like the Psalms. All three command our care for the poor. The most oft repeated command in the Hebrew Bible is this: to care for the widows, orphans and strangers, or immigrants, those most vulnerable in the society. Listen to Deuteronomy from the Torah:

"For the poor will never cease out of your land; *therefore* I command you, You shall open wide your hand to your brother, sister, to the needy and to the poor, in the land." (15:11)

Jesus once quoted the first part of this verse, "the poor you will have with you always", and too many Christians, ignoring the second half of Deuteronomy's words, have used it to sanction a complacency about the poor.

And what about the prophets who called us not only to care for the poor in direct acts of mercy, but also to change the laws and structures that produced poverty? So the prophet 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.” (10:1-2)

God called the poor, “my people”!

And the Writings too. Listen to 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. (72:1,4)

Since we live in a democracy we should hear the verse: Give our democracy your justice, O God.” It’s about political policy too!

Jesus does not weaken his Bible’s call for mercy and justice, though many ignore him here.

So Abraham says sternly to the rich man: “They have the Bible and the preachers, let them listen to them!” I think we have here at Grace. If you look at the board at the back behind the audio desk, you see the photos of our members. And around the photos are the emblems of the 20 plus

organizations we support and are personally involved in. We care for the poor and vulnerable, and we work for the common good of all people in the community. We've listened.

The parable is about nations too. It is about the wealth and income gap between the 1 percenters, the rich, and the rest of the nation. I could drown you in statistics, but it is the nation drowning in these statistics. The top one percent owns 15 times more wealth than the bottom 50 percent. In the 1970's, the wealthiest one percent owned about 20 percent of the nation's total household wealth, today over 35 percent. And to cite Robert Reich, the NY Times economics writer, the rich have enough political power to cut their taxes to almost nothing. A few years ago, President Jimmy Carter said, "We have become an oligarchy with unlimited political bribery." And the plight of the poorest among us, the Lazaruses among us, has gotten worse and worse. Is this not a moral issue of urgent importance? Nations die of legalized injustice.

V

Back to the parable. The rich man persists: "But if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!" Maybe he is changing! Jesus didn't say it was impossible for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God, only that it was hard. Jesus doesn't give up on any of us!

Here is where Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* comes in. The ghost of Jacob Marley returns to Scrooge, and it *did* change him. But Abraham is dubious of such: "Even if one should rise from the dead they will not believe." We don't need ghosts. God doesn't send ghosts! The Bible is all we need! Jesus didn't have his own resurrection in mind, but Luke did and we do. Even Jesus' *resurrection* doesn't convince everyone to listen to him. Despite the odds, we keep our witness going to the way of Jesus. That's our mission.

People in history have been changed by reading this parable, not only in lives given to the poor, but also in lives given to public service. Albert Schweitzer was changed by this parable. He was the Bach scholar, organist and New Testament scholar who wrote the monumental *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, but this parable and the presence of "the Christ arisen in our hearts" (his words) convinced him to leave his comfortable University life in Europe and go to medical school and found hospital in Africa. He later wrote these poignant words: "I wanted to be a doctor that I might be able to work without having to talk." "For years," he said, "I had been giving myself out in words." Now he was putting "the religion of love", as he put it , into practice. I grew up playing the cello, and have always loved Bach, and

I've given myself out in words most of my life, so his words and his life strike tenderly to the heart.

VI

Finally, let's go back and think about that "one drop of water" the rich man begged for. We carry one drop of water to those in need every week. Who has helped at ICM? Served meals at Fifth Street? Helped with Meals on Wheels? Worked with children with learning disabilities? Supported the youth of our community at PFLAG? Helped with Speak Life and Live? Taught children? Who've been father-like and cared for and encouraged children and youth? If I had a few more minutes every hand in this room would be raised! Your one drop of water matters! Blessed are you, Jesus said, who carry water to the world.

Sue told me of going to The Vanilla Bean recently with Linda Marshall. An older man, apparently homeless, was sitting at a table outside the front door. The people at Vanilla Bean give him a cup of coffee every morning and let him sit at their outdoor tables. A drop of water there! When Linda passed the man she greeted him cheerfully, "Good Morning." Then asked "What do you think of the weather?" A drop of water.

This parable of Jesus can sneak up on us, come in the side door, do its holy work, even in us here at church again, who know all about Moses and the Prophets and Jesus.