

Doing the Gospel

Luke 16:19-31

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I.

Today we continue to follow the narrative of the Gospel story according to Luke. As Luke's Gospel proceeds, Jesus finds himself in hotter and hotter water. It seems that the closer his journey takes him to Jerusalem, the center of religious, political, and commercial power, the more the authorities are threatened by him. Of course, if he's trying to avoid controversy, he's doing a poor job of it. Instead of letting the scribes and the Pharisees off the hook, he's putting them on it.

Luke tells us that today's parable, the story of Lazarus and the Rich Man, is a story Jesus shares with the Pharisees, who were, the text says, "lovers of money." We should be suspicious of sweeping generalizations such as this, even when we find them in scripture.

Two millennia of anti-Jewish prejudice give us reason for our suspicion. These kinds of generalizations prevail even in our own day, including the view that either Black Lives Matter or police matter. Let us not drive an unnecessary wedge in between two things that both matter.

Nevertheless, Luke's commentary about the love of money is in keeping with the overall message of his Gospel.

Beginning with Mary's song when she learns she is pregnant, Luke's Gospel is concerned with a world of the rich and the poor in which God is working, subversively, to upend settled social arrangements.

Scholars have pointed out that Jesus talks about money and related issues more than any other topic save the kingdom of God itself.

Especially in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is as concerned with the material aspects of God's kingdom as he is with its spiritual dimensions.

And so, when we hear a story like that of Lazarus and the Rich Man, we are challenged by both its material and spiritual implications.

This congregation has heard stories from Middle Schoolers and High Schoolers and adults about experiences they have had on their respective mission trips.

What is often so powerful about these experiences is that we begin to see that ultimate meaning is finally not related to material wealth,

and yet when we realize that all people are children of God, and that God is a God of justice who has made adequate provision for all creatures, we are seized by a holy sense that things are not as they should be, not as God intends.

Often we realize that those who are not wealthy materially are generous with what little they do have, and are therefore spiritually rich.

Once while at seminary in Boston, I stood waiting in a covered bus station.

A man with ragged clothes and a large dirty sack started rifling through a garbage can close by.

I remember feeling sorry for him, sorry to see where his meals came from.

Then I got bothered because some of the trash was ending up on the ground.

Finally, he came up with a handful of sandwich bread and I thought,

“Good, he found lunch. Maybe he’ll clean up his mess now.”

Instead, inexplicably, he tore the bread to pieces, threw it on the ground, and walked away, making an even bigger mess.

But my vision was limited, because then it happened.

Birds descended from the rafters of the bus station and feasted on the bread.

The man did for them what I forgot to do for him.

II.

Some of you may be turned off by the mention of “Hades” in today’s Gospel story.

On my candidating weekend in May, during the Saturday evening dinner, someone submitted a question, well, more of a statement really, that said, “No hell and damnation, please.”

If the intention behind that statement was, “We hope you aren’t the kind of preacher who is fixated on hell as a place where the unrepentant masses end up after death,” well, then you picked the right parson.

But I agree with writer Kathleen Norris who wrote, “Hell is hearing the Gospel and then not doing it.”

That definition applies to today’s story, a story of unexpected reversals.

There is a rich man whose name we do not know.

And there is a poor man whose name we know: Lazarus.

The difference between these two characters is stark.

One would think Luke was exaggerating if we didn’t experience the same kind of disparity in wealth and well-being in our own society.

The rich man lives in a house fortified by a gate where he feasts sumptuously every day.

At that gate was Lazarus, who was not only poor, but afflicted with disease.

He would have been happy to eat the scraps from the rich man's table, but apparently the rich man never even noticed him. In the words of The Lord's Prayer, the rich man's daily bread was a lavish feast, while Lazarus had no daily bread at all.

Jesus tells us that the two men died, that angels carried Lazarus to be with Abraham, the father of all the faithful, and that the rich man was buried and found himself in Hades, a Greek word describing the place of the dead.

I want to underscore, at this point, that hell is not a particularly prominent facet of Jesus' teaching, and that the concept of Hades is a Greek one, not a Jewish one. In other words, Jesus is using the concept of Hades more to make an ethical point about how to treat the least among us.

He is less concerned with making a metaphysical point about fate following death. The ethical point he is making is in response to a very Jewish question, namely, "Why is it that there is so much inequality in the world and how can it make in sense in light of belief in a God who is just?"

Jesus response is to say that, in the economy of God, there will be unprecedented reversals, in this life and in the next, reversals that reflect the full justice of God. But more important than the question of *why* things are a certain way is, knowing that they are that way, what then is required of us?

And according to the story, what is required of those who have is quite simple: see those who go without, notice them, acknowledge their humanity, and give them the respect any child of God deserves.

Next, without attempting to be their savior, give of what you have.

As Luke's John the Baptizer puts it, "If you've got two coats, give one away."

In other words, allow those who suffer to stoke the flames of compassion in your heart, so that you are moved to *do something, anything* to alleviate that suffering.

A word of warning here: it is not up to you to solve the problems of the world, let alone all of one person's problems.

We are, each of us, responsible for stewarding what God gives us, but when we think it is all up to us, we can, as the quote we heard earlier puts it, become "daunted by the enormity of the world's grief."

Better to recognize our own helplessness, our own poverty.

When we accept that we cannot solve a problem all by ourselves, we can then do what we can, like the boy on the beach casting sand dollars into the sea.

In the words of the prophet Micah: "Do justice, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now."

And as the Talmud puts it: "You are not obligated to complete this work, but neither are you free to abandon it."

III.

It's interesting in the story of Lazarus and the Rich Man that the rich man, even after having been cast into Hades, never really experiences a change of heart.

He still doesn't speak directly to Lazarus. Instead, he orders Abraham to tell Lazarus to help him.

When Abraham explains why that is not possible (perhaps the "chasm" is a closed heart), the rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus from the dead to go and tell his five brothers so they won't experience the same fate.

To which Abraham responds that Moses and the prophets have already told them everything they need to know to avoid the hell of hearing the Gospel and not doing it.

In an obvious allusion to Jesus' resurrection, Abraham ends the story with the words, "neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

It's not an easy story to hear, especially for those of us living in the developed world of the 21st century, and especially especially those of us who are middle and upper middle class.

Someone accurately described those of us in that category as the most privileged class of people in the history of the world.

Is the point of the story meant to scare people like us?

No, it can't be, because fear paralyzes us from acting, and this story comes from the one who said with his words and his life, "Have faith and do not be afraid."

Instead, I think the story is meant to wake us up,
wake us up to our privilege,
wake us up to the abundance in our lives,
wake us up to the opportunity to let our resources flow,
wake us up to people who are suffering on our own doorstep,
wake us up to share, if nothing else, our table scraps with those who are hungry.

IV.

It makes me think of the Lord's Supper, or Communion, also called the Eucharist. Eucharist means "Thanksgiving."

Next week we will gather at the Communion table on Worldwide Communion Sunday.

In essence, we come to the table along with the whole world, with people of varying material and spiritual means.

And at that table, we are all invited to feast – not the sumptuous feast of the rich man, but the Eucharistic feast of those whose eyes and hearts have been opened to the love of God and neighbor.

It is a feast of abundance, symbolized by a tiny piece of bread and taste of the grape, just enough to give us all of us a foretaste of the kingdom to come.

Reformed theologian Karl Barth - one of my favorites - commenting on the Apostles Creed, said we know of only one person in the history of the world who most certainly went to hell, and that was Jesus himself.

I imagine him there,
meeting the rich man,
waking him up,
changing his mind and his heart,
and giving him, at long last, a name.
And his name is: me.