

*“Before I draw nearer to that stone to which you point, answer me one question. Are these the shadows of the things that Will be, or are they shadows of things that May be, only?” Still the Ghost pointed downward to the grave by which it stood. “Men’s courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead...But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change. Say it is thus with what you show me.” The Spirit was immovable as ever.*

Those are the words that a terrified Ebenezer Scrooge spoke in the presence of the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. Charles Dickens’ classic, *A Christmas Carol*, is of course not a Jewish story. But then neither is the story that Jesus tells of the “Rich Man and Lazarus.” They are both, however, great examples of Jewish *prophecy*. The story that Jesus tells is more Greek than Jewish, but the point of the story is the same as one that Dickens made.

Christians have a habit of misunderstanding Jewish prophecy as the ability to foretell certain fates, but Moses, the prophets and Jesus are focused on something beyond fortune-telling. Jewish prophecy focuses on repentance, not on predicting the future, especially as it relates to the afterlife.

When Jesus and Luke were alive, Israelites of the Second Temple period were just beginning to explore the notion of an afterlife divided into a heaven and a hell. When people died, whether righteous or not, they simply became shades who existed in a place of stillness and darkness called Sheol. So it is not trivial that Jesus refers instead to Hades, a term for the emerging idea of an underworld borrowed from Greek mythology.

I’m inclined to think that *if* Jesus told this story, he adopted a folktale from another tradition to keep his listeners from being distracted. You’ll notice that his parable says nothing definitive about the hereafter; that is, he gives no descriptions of heaven or hell. He does not condemn wealth or elevate poverty, and he provides little in the way of moral insight for the rich man. That’s because Jesus is offering something different.

Like all good Jewish prophecy, the purpose of his parable is to compel us to consider the paths that we are on in life *in the here and now*. You and I are neither the rich man nor Lazarus. This cautionary tale, if we will hear it, is a reminder that we have time to open our eyes to people who are currently in our blind spots. That does require some humility from us and humility does not come naturally to us all.

Last Tuesday, the CEO of Wells Fargo, John Stumpf, testified in front of the Senate Banking Committee. He was there because, for at least the last five years of Stumpf's watch, Wells Fargo employees set up more than a million and a half unauthorized deposit accounts and issued more than 500,000 unauthorized credit card applications for Wells Fargo customers, all without customer knowledge or permission. People were charged fines and fees on accounts that they did not authorize. The sales figures drove Wells Fargo stock up impressively. As CEO, John Stumpf made more than \$200 million in stock alone.

After investigative journalists exposed the scam, the bank fired more than 5,000 people, most of whom made minimum wage, along with a handful of branch managers and regional managers. Three years later, on the day before his testimony, Stumpf finally accepted full responsibility for the bank's unethical behavior and apologized for "not doing more sooner."

At the hearing, Senator Elizabeth Warren exposed Stumpf's remarkably weak version of taking responsibility: "You haven't resigned," she said, "you haven't returned a single nickel of your personal earnings, you haven't fired a single senior executive."

As Warren pressed her reprimand, Stumpf sputtered excuses and blamed scapegoats, blinking like a rabbit caught in headlights. He looked like he genuinely did not understand what he had done wrong. Now it's not for me to judge the man. I don't know if Stumpf is an evil man or not. I do wonder what caused him to behave exactly like the rich man in Luke's parable.

"Father Abraham, have mercy on me," the rich man demands directly of Abraham. He never makes a move to apologize to Lazarus or even to speak to him, although he clearly sees Lazarus and knows his name. "Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue," he commands again, "for I am in agony in these flames."

He wants a moment of relief and still cannot see why Lazarus should not deliver it. The rich man has made no effort to change his ways. He cannot or perhaps simply *will* not see the consequences of his self-involved behavior. He continues to treat Lazarus only as an inferior—a means to an end—rather than another human being with whom he might make some connection.

But, unlike John Stumpf and you and me, the rich man in the parable is dead. He has closed the gate behind him. On this earthly plane, there was a wall between the rich man and Lazarus, but wasn't a permanent divide. Day after day, Lazarus sat in a gate. In the parable, that gate became a great

chasm after death. The opportunity to make amends was lost to the rich man in the parable.

I maintain that it was the rich man himself who made the division permanent. Imagine what might have happened if the rich man had seen Lazarus—actually seen Lazarus the human being. What if, in finally seeing Lazarus, the rich man recognized his need to beg forgiveness from Lazarus instead of water from Abraham. What if he had simply said, “Lazarus, I am so sorry. I could have helped you when I was alive, but I chose my own selfishness instead. I was wrong. Please forgive me.” Surely, Abraham would have welcomed his son home.

You see, the point of this parable is not that people with money are going to hell or that people with blind-spots are going to hell, even John Strumpf in all his ignorance and denial. The point is not that *anyone* is going to hell after they die. The point is that you and I have *time*—you and I have a precious few moments to consider the dire warning of the parable.

You and I have the teachings of Moses, the prophets and Jesus in our scriptures and in our tradition. Those teachings can inform a fearless inventory of our behavior. You and I have the example of the life of the one who has risen from the dead, now present to us in the bread and wine. That foretaste of heaven can strengthen our resolve to seek and trust God.

Take this story as a wake-up call, a warning, like the dream sequences of Ebenezer Scrooge. He had a moment that the rich man never got. Holding up his hands in a last prayer to have his fate reversed, Scrooge watched the Phantom’s hood and dress shrink and collapse, dwindling down into his own bedpost in his own room. “Best and happiest of all,” Dickens writes, “the time before him was his own, to make amends in!” You and I have that same happy moment available to us if we will take this parable as an opportunity to pull back whatever curtain is blinding our eyes to behaviors that we urgently need to see before it is too late.

There are barriers that exist already between us and others, I promise you. Barriers of economics, barriers of perspective, barriers of prejudice, ignorance and intolerance. Right now, they are barriers with gates, not chasms. But Jesus left us a parable, not a prediction. You and I still have the power and a passing window of opportunity to rewrite the ending. You and I still have time to hear the voice of the Risen Christ coaxing us not to fear or increase divisions, but to love. Not to blame or point fingers at others, but to seek mercy by actually take responsibility for our actions. Not to justify our

self-centeredness or inaction, but to seek forgiveness in humility as we pursue justice for all, respecting the dignity of every human being.

Through his death and resurrection, Christ has opened the way to eternal life for all. That opening is not an escape-hatch from the woes of the world. The opening is the breach, a gate in the wall, through which the kingdom of God is coming into this world. Who sits at that gate, I wonder, that I am ignoring? Who waits there for our compassion?

You and I have the option to let this world blind us with fear, anger and resentment. If we choose fear, our lives will become a series of self-centered isolations and tragically missed opportunities. I can't imagine a more exquisite hell than standing before God having *chosen* to waste the one, beautiful and fragile life that God has given me, can you?

It's time to open our eyes. Seize the occasion to turn them to God, while we still have God-given breath within us. *That way* lies the path to heaven.