

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 16:19-31
September 29th, 2019
The Rev. John Forman

Jesus said, “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. 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; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’ He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house-- for I have five brothers-- that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

This is the last in a series of parables that Luke's Jesus tells featuring money troubles – that aren't about money, not really. At the end of one, a father who is extravagantly wasteful with his money starts the process of reconciliation with his sons. By the end of the next parable, a master gains honor and reputation as a generous man as a result of a dishonest but clever steward.

This final story opens with a man who wore fine purple linen and feasted sumptuously every day, while just beyond his gate, a destitute man named Lazarus lay starving to death.

Lazarus dies and the angels carry him to the bosom of Abraham. Not heaven, mind you. Lazarus goes to a place of peace set apart for the righteous in Hades; the “vale of Abraham,” a place of sheltering valleys in the realm of the dead. The rich man in the parable is also there in Hades, although things are not going so sweet for him. In Hades, not hell.

We will miss the point if we hear this is as a literal description of heaven and hell. And we run the same risk if we don't recognize that having money is not what dropped the rich man into Hades.

Jesus is telling a cautionary tale to a group of Pharisees, his own tribe, who have shown an inordinate attachment to the wealth that their positions have afforded them. Despite what parts of the church have mistakenly taught,

Jesus is not condemning *anyone*; not all Pharisees, definitely not all Jews and not even people with material wealth.

You see, the wealthy man's money isn't why he is being tormented in Hades. It has more to do with the gate that he bought with his money. In other words, the rich man could have opened his gate and helped Lazarus. But he didn't. He could have fulfilled his cultural obligation by living less hedonistically and selfishly and giving to those less fortunate from his surplus. But he didn't. And when he died, he found himself being tormented.

He is in Hades, though not in the peaceful vale where Lazarus is hanging out with Abraham. The rich man is being tormented by flames and thirst. Luke's Greek word for "tormented," *básanos*, refers to a black, silicon-based stone used as a touchstone to test the purity of precious metal like silver and gold. Coins made of pure metals rubbed on the stone left a distinctive mark.

By the time Jesus and Luke lived, the word had become a metaphor for certain instruments and devices used to force the truth out of people. The torment was intended to be purifying and corrective, like the suffering of the rich man in this parable. We often confuse Dante's dramatic and lurid description of eternal damnation with Jewish prophecy that focused instead on repentance that led to reunion with God.

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. Jesus refers instead to Hades, a term for the emerging idea of an underworld borrowed from Greek mythology.

And yet, Jesus he gives no new descriptions of heaven or hell. Instead, he simply places the Jewish patriarch Abraham into the Greek mythological setting and continues, like all good Jewish prophecy, to compel us to consider the life paths we are on in the here and now. That requires some humility from us. And humility seems to be missing from the rich man.

While he and Lazarus were still alive, the gate physically separated the two of them. And if that were the end of it, well, maybe these two children of Abraham could find some other way to interact. But the rich man's gate was more than physical. It shut Lazarus out of his heart and mind just as surely as it kept a poor brother covered with sores off the rich man's property.

I think Jesus' story is, in part, a good reminder that we all need to open our hearts and resources to share God's bounty with our neighbors. Let me tell you a story.

When I was in Bali some years back, a friend of mine told me about a Vietnamese woman whose husband took out a mortgage and bought a farm. He died leaving her with a debt that she thought she wouldn't be able to pay off in her lifetime. The mortgage was \$600.

That debt left her so poor that she got up in each morning and boiled one egg, which she split between her two daughters, and she had a little coffee. Later in the day, the three of them shared about a cup of boiled rice.

That was how they lived until someone at the organization where my friend works got wind of her and provided her with a treadle pump for about \$75. A treadle pump is an irrigation device that sits on top of a well. It pumps water up when someone gets on it and steps up and down like the stair-machines you see in gyms.

And so, every day this woman and her daughters take turns essentially climbing stairs for hours to drive the pistons that draw groundwater up to the surface. The new water supply was all she needed to make her farm prosper, by Vietnamese standards. It's a relatively happy ending.

We help our neighbors here at St. Elizabeth in a number of creative ways: many of us quietly support some of our fellow parishioners with a little food, a little rent or transportation and such. Together, we share a garden and maintain a building with Neighborhood House so that a group of highly trained professionals can really help people in ways that we can't; neighborhood families that might otherwise be gathering at closed gates.

These are important, good and right actions.

For the rich man in Jesus' parable, they are not the whole story. His stinginess is not even the main reason the rich man is separated from God. The rich man sees a gate that closes Lazarus out of his world. What he doesn't seem to notice is that there is also a gate keeping him out of Lazarus's world.

"Father Abraham, have mercy on me," the rich man demands directly of Abraham. He never considers apologizing to Lazarus or even speaking to him, although he clearly notices 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; as a functional means to an end.

Abraham chastises the rich man and then says: “Besides all this, between you and us, a great chasm has been fixed.” What the rich man never learns is that he *himself* fixed the great chasm. Imagine what might have happened if the rich man had seen Lazarus – actually *seen* Lazarus as a human being and another child of Abraham. And in finally seeing Lazarus, also saw his need to beg forgiveness from Lazarus instead of water from Abraham.

You see, the point of this parable was never to define who is going to heaven and who is going hell after they die. The rich man is a prisoner of his own self-important hubris. And like anyone who has chosen to reject all humility in service of a conceited self-image, he is trapped in Hades just as surely as he was trapped in life.

“A secret that we all too often hide from ourselves,” writes Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart, “is that we walk in hell every day. There is, though, another and greater secret too: We also walk in heaven every day.”

In the process of maturing into adulthood, most of us spend *some* time in the confining misery that we impose on ourselves by rejecting the love that can set us free. And for a time, at least speaking for myself, we foolishly imagine that we can free ourselves without help. And yet, while we still have breath in us, we have a few precious opportunities to consider the dire warning of this parable.

We have the teachings of Moses, the prophets and Jesus in our scriptures and in our tradition. If we listen, those teachings can inspire us to wake up and take a fearless inventory of our behavior. If we seek God’s grace and help, our practices of prayer and the sacraments of our faith can transport us, even momentarily, into rare and magnificent moments of clarity that can become increasingly extended experiences.

There are, as you well know, barriers that exist between us and others. Barriers of economics, barriers of perspective, barriers of prejudice, ignorance and intolerance. Right now, they are barriers with gates, not fixed chasms. Jesus left us a parable, not a prediction.

We still have the power to write what happens next. We still have time to hear the voice of the Risen Christ coaxing us toward love. Or we have the option to let this world blind us with anger, make us numb with fear, or resentful in self-centered isolation and tragically missed opportunities.

And 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 each one of us, can you?

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