

Luke 16:19-31 – The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus

Today's Gospel reading is the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. It's one of Jesus' most pointed and poignant parables about money – how we relate to money and what we are supposed to do with it. This reading today closes out chapter 16 of Luke's gospel, which focuses heavily on our goods, possessions, and money. Jesus is nearing the end of his ministry. The death and suffering he always seemed to know was coming is now very much approaching. Time is drawing short, and Jesus seems to know that there is still so much to teach us, still so much to say to shock us out of the comfortable stream of our lives. As Jerusalem and the cross draw ever nearer, Jesus' teachings become more urgent, more extreme, more important than ever. We ignore or downplay them to our own peril. It is imperative, both for the quality of our own lives and for the building up of God's kingdom, that we learn to grapple with these hard teachings, that we don't minimize, reduce, or domesticate them – that we lean into the tension this parable invites, and that we allow ourselves, with God's help, to change and grow because of it.

This parable begins by setting the scene. There are two men. The first is a rich man who is the very picture of abundance – fancy clothes, sumptuous feasts, gated home. This man knows no need, neither in himself, nor in the people around him. This rich man is contrasted with Lazarus, the poor beggar, left at the rich man's gate, covered in sores, and starving to death. It's important to note that this beggar has a name, Lazarus, and he is the only character in a parable to receive one. Though he is invisible to the people around him, he is not invisible to Jesus, nor, as the parable will point out, to God.

Our parable continues, telling us that both men die, first Lazarus, then the rich man. In death the reversal of fortunes between these two men is instantaneous. The rich man is simply

stated as being buried, while Lazarus is borne in the arms of angels right to the side of Abraham. While in life, the rich man lived in fine houses, he now finds himself in the torment of eternal flames. Lazarus, meanwhile, finds himself in paradise, escaping his former life of chronic illness, starvation, and loneliness.

Even in death, it seems the rich man still struggles to see Lazarus as a fellow human being and an equal. He calls to Abraham and asks him to send Lazarus to tend to his needs and to provide him with a bit of comfort from the torment he is now experiencing. Even now, he thinks Lazarus beneath him, a servant or errand boy, one who can be commanded to provide for the needs of others. Despite the situations they now find themselves in, the rich man seemingly finds no irony in commanding Lazarus to comfort him and meet his needs, something the rich man certainly never offered to Lazarus while they were alive.

Lazarus never speaks in this parable. We never hear from his own mouth how he felt in life nor how he feels about the reversal of fortunes and situations in the afterlife. Instead, Lazarus is offered the honor of having Abraham speak for him. And Abraham tells the rich man that there is nothing Lazarus, or anyone, can do for him now. Fate is sealed and roles are set. The rich man, still very much seeming not to get it, tries again. Send Lazarus, he tells Abraham, to warn my brothers against leading the kind of life he led, the kind of life he must know his brothers are leading now. But Abraham will not budge. Abraham will not allow Lazarus to be used by the whims of powerful, wealthy others, nor, he says, will it matter. If these people cannot be persuaded out of their greed, selfishness, and over-indulgence by the prophets and scriptures, they will not be talked out of it by someone coming to them from the dead.

This parable is a difficult parable, one that is intentionally provocative and designed to draw a reaction from the listener. It's important to note that this parable says a lot more about how we are supposed to live in the here and now than about what happens to us when we die. In a Gospel that focuses repeatedly on God's particular love of and care for the poor, this parable serves as a culmination on Jesus' teachings about our God-given calling to care for each other and to use our resources to meet the needs of those around us.

In this section of Luke, the cross is drawing ever nearer. Jesus knows his time is running short, and he still has things left to teach us about how to be better people, better at meeting each other's needs and better at doing the things that God would like for us to do. In Luke, Jesus has a lot to say about money and resources. From the very beginning, when Mary learns that she will give birth to the long-awaited Messiah, the first thing she does is sing a song about God's coming kingdom, what we know as the Magnificat. In her song, she reminds us that the powerful will be brought low, the lowly will be lifted up, the hungry will be filled, and those who have more than enough might just find themselves empty handed. Mary's song is a theme that will echo throughout Luke, this call to align ourselves with those who are lowly, powerless, and meager, to align ourselves with those who God is also particularly aligned with. It is difficult, but it is necessary if we are to make the earth even remotely resemble God's dream for us.

Last week's Gospel reading reminded us that we cannot serve God and wealth, and this week's Gospel reading is designed to drive that point home. One of the commentaries that I read said it's impossible for humans not to serve something – we will spend our lives chasing, desiring, and working toward *something*. Jesus tells us to make sure it's the *right* something – God, and God's kingdom here on earth.

For people in deep, deep need, and there are many of them around the world and also right here in our own community, this Gospel needs no real interpretation. The Good News is so apparent – God sees you, knows you, and loves you, even as those around you might ignore your needs or even your very being. But for those of us who do not lack, who have more than enough this Gospel can seem quite stark. If you struggle, please know you are not alone. I, too, have to grapple with the implications of this parable and how I must shape my life if I want it to align more fully with God’s will. This parable is a call to repentance, a call to self-examination, a call to look at the things we have in our lives, and then to ask God to help us always use them for the building up of the kingdom and the betterment of our brothers and sisters around us, especially those who are in need.

Friends, having money isn’t in itself a bad thing. But Jesus knows how hard it is for us to stop being so obsessed with it, how hard it is for us to not be a servant of our goods and wealth, and forget to be a servant of God. One commentary I read several weeks ago said that we can never stop loving money by chasing more of it, because we will never get to the point where we finally think we have enough it. Humans are not good at knowing when enough is truly enough. Goods, wealth, money – mammon, as the Bible calls it – is insidious because it always tells us that we need just a little more than what we currently have. Just a little more, and you’ll finally be safe. Just a little more, and your kids will get into the right schools and achieve the perfect lives. Just a little more, and our house, our cars, our clothes, *ourselves* will finally be good enough. No, the only way we ever cure ourselves of the love of money and goods is to learn to give them away, to be kind and generous and hospitable toward the people around us, to hold it lightly and use it well.

Like love, resources are meant to be shared, not hoarded. We cannot build up God's kingdom by hiding away the good things for ourselves. The scriptures are clear even as the path forward is hard. It's a lifestyle of generosity, a lifestyle of caring that we are called into. And with God's help, it's one we can sincerely work to embrace and live out.