

Luke 16:19-31

Once upon a time, there was a rich man who ate and dressed very well. He lived in an opulent mansion surrounded by a large, secure wall. At the gate to the outside, there was a poor, diseased man named Lazarus. Lazarus was starving, and begged the rich man for food — not the food from the man's table, but only the food from the floor; the dog scraps. Weeks went by. The rich man kept ignoring Lazarus, and Lazarus kept getting sicker and weaker and hungrier. Eventually, both men died. Fast-forward to the afterlife: Lazarus is in heaven, and the rich man is in Hades which most Christians refer to as Hell. So we have a rich man who doesn't care about the poor and goes to Hell, and the poor man who is forced to beg goes to Heaven. The end.

Well, perhaps, not so fast. Parables in general and this one in particular can't be summed up with a paragraph or two of quick and dirty exegesis that reduces the narrative to a simplistic binary between rich and poor. "The rich go to hell, and the poor go to heaven."

This narrative is far richer, more complex, and more engaging than reducing it to the tired old binary of morally bankrupt rich people against the innocent poor. So what is going on here? How are we to make sense of this story? Where is the Good News?

This parable is found only in Luke. It underscores a theme expressed earlier in his Gospel. God has "put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those

of low degree." The story is a three-act play. The first act portrays the earthly contrast between the wealthy man and Lazarus. The second act describes the reversal of their conditions in the afterlife. The third act depicts the rich man's request to Father Abraham for a sign so that those still living can avoid his torment, a request that Abraham refuses.

It's helpful to remember that a parable is a unique genre of literature, set apart from fables, anecdotes, or allegories. That's not to say that a fable can't convey a moral message, or an anecdote can't illustrate a larger point, or an allegory can't reveal hidden religious or political meaning. Parables can do all of those things — but they can also do none of those things.

More than simple literary devices, parables are meant to offer us glimpses into the Kingdom of God; snapshots of how God does things in God's realm, as opposed to how we do things in our world. The difference between the two is often surprising, and even jarring at times!

With its vivid journey to the afterlife, and its exaggerated imagery of contrast, this parable fits the form of an apocalypse. An apocalypse serves as a wake-up call, pulling back a curtain to open our eyes to something we urgently need to see before it is too late.

On first hearing, this parable may appear to suggest that the rich man's sin lay in the fact that he ignored Lazarus, even when he was in grave and dire need. And there is something to that. The background of this parable is a tale from Egyptian

folklore about the reversal of fates after death. It also has connections to rabbinic stories. In Greek the name Lazaros has the same root as the name Eliezer who, the book of Genesis tells us, was a servant of Abraham. Some rabbinic tales feature Eliezer or Lazaros, walking in disguise on the earth and reporting back to Abraham on how his children are observing the Torah's prescriptions regarding the treatment of the widow, the orphan, and the poor. It's interesting that in our parable, Lazarus or perhaps Eliezer, the poor beggar, returns to Abraham's bosom...

Using parables, Jesus was teaching his disciples about money when some Pharisees overheard the conversation. He had just finished telling the parable of the rich fool who was going to build a bigger barn to store his wealth but died during the night. They began mocking his other worldly teaching on the matter because they loved money. Money has always been and will always be a way of life for people who try to assert their value to others through their wealth. Jesus continued to teach and the Pharisees continued to listen.

So, Jesus told a story about a rich man who had everything he could ever want in life. He lived a life full of luxury and even had a gated community all to himself. But, there was a problem. The rich man always dressing himself in the finest of clothes, would routinely ignore Lazarus just outside his gate. Lazarus suffered from the misfortune of being clothed in open sores brought on by a hard life. He was so pitiful that even dogs would come and lick his open wounds.

The rich man knew who Lazarus was but he had no need for him. Lazarus

could not bring the rich man any sort of wealth or value for this life. To the rich man, Lazarus was not even worth giving leftover scraps from the dinner table. As Jesus continued to unfold this story, it was becoming obvious that Jesus was comparing the Pharisees and their love for money to the rich man.

First-century hearers of this parable would not have assumed that the rich man was evil and that the poor man was righteous. On the contrary, wealth in the ancient world was often viewed as a sign of divine favour, while poverty was viewed as evidence of sin. The rich man's sin was not that he was rich, but that, during his earthly life, he did not "see" Lazarus, despite his daily presence at the entrance to his home. The first time he ever "sees" Lazarus is in Hades when he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side.

What came next in the story must have changed the Pharisees outward sneers and jeers to flat out internal outrage. Both the rich man and Lazarus die. The rich man finds himself in Hades while Lazarus finds himself by Abraham's side. It's only when the rich man had lost everything and Lazarus had gained everything that Lazarus had any value to the man who found himself now in Hades.

But still, the rich man didn't value Lazarus. He valued what Lazarus could do for him and his family. Let Lazarus give me something cold to drink while I sit here in anguish. Let Lazarus warn my family. Even Hades had not changed the rich man's heart. The rich man, now a man with nothing, was still focussed on what he could gain. The rich man did not apologize. He did not beg God for mercy. He did not turn

from his ways. The man's heart was truly a reflection of the uncrossable chasm between heaven and hell.

During his life the rich man did not even see the poor man who was at his gate every day. Most translations give the impression that Lazarus was simply sitting at the manor gate. But the Greek literally says that he was cast, tossed or thrown there, although it is not clear by whom - perhaps the rich man's servants.

Now, in the afterlife, he finally sees Lazarus -- but it's too late. The chasm between the rich man and poor Lazarus is permanent, with no way to cross over the chasm. The exaggerated apocalyptic contrasts are many: the lavish meals of the rich man's table in life, contrasted with his unquenchable thirst after death; the deathly poverty of Lazarus, contrasted with his rest in the bosom of Abraham. These contrasts underscore the parable's function as urgent warning.

Poor Lazarus lacks an identity, even though he has a name. We often put people in categories and make assumptions as a result. But each person is not simply a member of a category. Each person has a name and is a unique gift of God made in the image of God. Lazarus, to the rich man, is invisible until the rich man, now deceased and himself in need, has need for Lazarus. Suddenly Lazarus - beloved Child of God - is no longer invisible.

"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." The rich man not only recognizes Lazarus in the afterlife, he calls him by name! The problem here

is not simply that the rich man ignored Lazarus or treated him as though he were invisible. The deeper problem is that, even in the afterlife, the rich man denied Lazarus's personhood; he denied that Lazarus had an equal share in God's economy and even in the afterlife, the rich man reduces Lazarus to a place of servitude. As far as the rich man was concerned, the eschatological implications of the situation made no difference. Lazarus would always be less important; less valuable than he was. Lazarus would always be a servant.

Think about Lazarus's personhood, and all of the ways in which the rich man could not - or would not - see it. Even though the rich man knew who Lazarus was, he didn't KNOW Laz. The parable is very much about relationship. On a mission trip to an orphanage in Jamaica, a church group presented the director with a \$1,000 cheque from someone in the U.S. The director sent the cheque back, thanking him but stating very clearly that it was important for their donors to know who it is they're wanting to support and if ever the man wished to come to the orphanage they would be more than happy to welcome him and show him what ministry they do. The donor did come for a few days and when he left, he left a cheque for \$10,000 ... because now he had a relationship with the orphanage and he continued to support it. And doesn't every person want a relationship, want to be acknowledged, want to be seen as a person, a child of God.

So this rich man, not only knows the name of Lazarus: he wants to be waited on. But Abraham informs him that the situation is now reversed: the one who had good things now doesn't and the one who suffered in his lifetime is now comforted.

The time to change that is long gone. The rich man reacts by wanting to ensure that his relatives don't end up the way he has. He begs Abraham, "Send Lazarus to warn my siblings so they won't end up the way I have." Abraham reminds the rich man that those siblings have already received sufficient warning because they have access to Moses and the prophets.

If your siblings do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." Apocalypses often have a hortatory function. With their exaggerated imagery apocalypses offer a wake-up call, a warning, like the dream sequences of Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol," which was based on this parable. If this parable is an apocalypse, then Luke is situating the audience not so much in the role of either Lazarus or the rich man, but in the role of the five siblings who are still alive. The five siblings who are still alive have time to open their eyes. They have time to see the poor people at their gates, before the chasm becomes permanent. "Send Lazarus to them, that he might warn them," cries the rich man on behalf of his brothers and sisters, "so that they do not come to this place of torment." The terrifyingly vivid apocalyptic journey to Hades awakens a sense of urgency on the part of Dickens' Marley who came back from the dead to warn his colleague, Ebenezer Scrooge, to repent from his selfish, miserly ways, before it is too late. Scrooge was then given an opportunity to see life through the eyes of the "other side" of the economic divide - and it changed him for good.

We are those five siblings of the rich man. We who are still alive have been

warned about our urgent situation. We too have Moses and the prophets; we have the scriptures; we have the manna lessons of God's economy, about God's care for the poor and hungry. We even have someone who has risen from the dead. Jesus is our Jacob Marley. The question is: Will we -- the five siblings of the rich man -- see? Will we heed the warning, before it is too late?

The bottom line is that Moses and the prophets are still speaking; they're still warning us of the dangers of seeing others as less than who God created them to be. Are we listening? Are we looking for the *imago Dei* — the image of God that dwells within each and every one of us?

The American author and playwright Tennessee Williams said it best: "The world is violent and mercurial. It will have its way with you. We are saved only by love — love for each other and the love that we pour into the art we feel compelled to share: being a parent, being a writer, being a painter, being a friend. We live in a perpetually burning building, and what we must save from it, all the time, is love."

As God's beloved children, the story of Lazarus and the rich man reminds us that every decision we make in response to God's grace-full "YES" to us is about stewardship. We are entrusted with the right use of the amazing abundance God provides. There is more than enough for all of us, but only if we are faithful in our use of resources, attentive to our neighbours' needs, and keep our focus on the provider of all good things. In living this way, we experience real life, and in this life the blessings pour forth so that we have enough and plenty to share. All are invited to

the table, to Christ's table, where all are fed and where no one is turned away.

Listen up, people of God. You are not invisible to your creator, and neither are your neighbours. We will not find our identity within the malls and halls of consumer culture or by shame, guilt, or duty. Instead, our identity comes through love, by seeing one another as we really are – broken, beautiful, and created in God's image – and affirming the wealth that comes through that alone.

In community we can affirm one another, find common ground, assure one other that there is enough when we trust, share, and care, and learn to hold lightly as the good things of God come into our possession and flow forth in a river of goodness that sustains this weary world. We do have true wealth, you and I. We have Jesus. We are loved. And we have the beloved community in which to learn, worship, grow, and serve with glad and generous hearts. This is the good news in the story of Lazarus and the rich man. But like our neighbour, we have to see it to experience it.

Amen.