

Sermon Proper 21

Year C

[RCL] Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15; Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16; 1 Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31

What Separates Us From Each Other and From God?

From the earliest of times people have told stories about the wicked getting their come-uppance. It's rooted in the now-popular belief in karma, although the idea of revenge, implicit in the way many now use the term isn't quite what it means in Eastern religions.

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus is not about ultimate revenge. I hope that's not too disappointing. It's more a case of "you just don't get it do you?"

Elizabeth Gaskell wrote a novel about a rich cotton mill owner in Victorian England, or more precisely the north of England. The name given to the 'fictional' city where the mill operates is a disguise for Manchester, perhaps the center of industrial growth and the exploitation of cheap labor before laws were introduced to protect working class people and banning child labor. The book was adapted for television by the BBC and shown in America on PBS.

At the heart of the story is the inability of the young mill owner and his hard mother to see beyond profit. The workers are a commodity. Their suffering is irrelevant. They are only visible when they make a nuisance of themselves: when they strike.

Jesus is talking to the Pharisees, although some authorities think his audience had changed and that he was talking to a group that didn't believe in eternal life, except in the form of Sheol, a shadowlands for the dead. They were called Sadducees and numbered in their ranks the ruling classes and the wealthy merchants. He re-tells a popular story of a rich man and a beggar. The picture Jesus paints vividly is one his audience immediately recognized. They lived in a culture where rich and poor lived in close proximity to each other, where beggars were part of the scenery as were stray dogs. Both beggars and dogs were held in contempt. Beggars were thought to be those abandoned by their families, or who were suffering for the sins of their parents or even great-grandparents. Dogs were regarded as slightly domesticated vermin.

The rich man was clothed in purple clothes. No cloth was more expensive than that dyed purple. Purple dye was only affordable by the very rich or by Roman officials and patricians. You may remember Lydia, the seller of purple, who befriended St. Paul? The rich man dined sumptuously, just as centuries later mill owners dressed fashionably and had tables, copied from those of the aristocracy, groaning with food, while their workers could scarcely prevent their children starving.

Lazarus lay at the entrance to the rich man's house. He was covered in sores; sores that even the dogs wouldn't lick. Did he have leprosy, the most feared disease of the ancient world? Dogs love to lick scratches and wounds, but not these. Like the Lebanese woman in another incident, he wanted to "gather up the crumbs under the table." The rich man swept past this grotesque "scum of the earth" until one day Lazarus was gone; he was dead.

The story now takes an unexpected turn. The rich man in Sheol is tormented by flames. At first his thoughts are still of himself. He begs Abraham to send Lazarus to give him a sip of water. Lazarus is still an object, perhaps no longer a beggar but still a servant. Abraham replies that a great gap now prevents the rich man from communicating with his people, the Chosen People, and those numbered among the chosen can't reach towards those in Sheol. A new barrier has been erected. No longer is it between the rich and the destitute, but now between those chosen by God and those who have rejected that calling by rejecting someone, who despite his abject poverty, was a fellow Jew.

The story twists again: "*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.'*"

Now an added layer is added to the story. It's still about the blindness of the rich to those whose lives depend on the work they provide or the charity they exhibit. The Rich Man suddenly becomes rebellious Israel, a people who have disobeyed God's laws, refused the vocation to which they have been called, and wouldn't change their ways even if a prophet rose from the dead. Here Jesus may have meant that they wouldn't believe even if Abraham or Moses, or Amos or Hosea rose from the dead. In retrospect we identify the resurrection of Jesus with these words.

What are we to learn from Jesus's story? Beware of gulfs. Beware of being so impressed with your own views, your own possessions, your own intelligence, that

you can't be reached by love and in particular, God's love. Be careful about that sort of self-justification that thoroughly separates us from God and each other, so that another or others become invisible and in your eyes, die. Note, we may think we have good reason for separating ourselves.

The Rich Man may have told himself that Lazarus was undeserving. The mill owner thought that profit was essential for the economy, for his business and for the workers. We may think we have good reason for creating space between ourselves and those who would take advantage of us, or whose views are abhorrent to us, as well as the more obvious candidates, those people who don't look like me, sound like me, vote like me, and perhaps worship like me.

However, are we incapable of resisting creating "great gulfs" or walls because we resist believing the one who rose from the dead?

Perhaps our unbelief is nuanced. Perhaps we deploy that ancient sentence, "Well, that's all right in theory but it doesn't work in practice: it's all wonderfully lovely. I only wish it worked."

The road to Sheol is paved with nuanced intentions.

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