



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 16 – Proper 21 Year C

Across the Chasm

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

We've just heard the story that Jesus tells, but I'd like to highlight a couple of details. Jesus mentions that the rich man, who is not named, is feasting sumptuously every day and wearing purple. This guy is ostentatiously rich – filthy rich, you might say. There is a poor man named Lazarus, not to be confused with the Lazarus that Jesus raised from the dead. This Lazarus is part of a fictional story that Jesus is telling, but Jesus gives him a name, perhaps as a sign of how God would honor him in his afterlife.

Lazarus is lying at the gate of the rich man's house. We'll focus on this detail later.

One of the notable aspects of this parable is that both the rich man and the poor man die. That's just a fact: everyone dies. No matter what you have, it can't save you from that most basic existential fact. Another thing that might be confusing is that Jesus mentions that the dead men are in Hades. In other parts of the gospels, Jesus mentions both Hades and Gehenna – basically, Hell. In this vision of Hades, both the righteous and unrighteous go to the same place but they are segregated by a great chasm, a barrier that keeps them apart.

Now, as you may know, we don't get to pick and choose what readings we have in church each week; they follow the Revised Common Lectionary. But if we were to choose a reading for this occasion in the life of our cities, this would be it.

How shall we read this story from Jesus? It's a fictional story, a parable – but we take Jesus' fiction very, very seriously, don't we? We try to live the Parable of the Good Samaritan; we try to live the Parable of the Lost Sheep. How shall we live *this* parable?

It can help to analogize the parables, placing ourselves within them: we are the lost sheep, God is the shepherd; we are the beaten-up one, the person who helps us is the Samaritan. This is how we analogize the parables. Then, we usually extend some meaning into our lives: we were lost, God found us, now we should live and love like that Good Shepherd and accept hospitality from Samaritans.

So, who are we in this parable? Are we the rich man who is ignoring the poor man? Are we the poor man, Lazarus? It's pretty clear we are not Abraham. Are we the great chasm that has been set up that keeps Lazarus and the rich man eternally divided?

Almost everyone who has some economic security would read themselves as the rich man. We are rightly chastened by Jesus to take note of the poor among us. There are plenty of Lazaruses around that we just don't see. That can be chilling.

Who is Lazarus then? In the story, Lazarus is sitting at the gate of the rich man's estate. We need to recall that in the ancient world, it was at the gates of cities and estates that the justice of a community was carried out. Cities were walled and there were small gates through which visitors would gain entrance. But the gates were also the courthouses and places where the common good could be decided. Lazarus has established himself at the gate as a statement of the failure of the community to deal justly and respectfully with him.

My sisters and brothers, while you may not like it, the unrest that is happening in our country is because the Lazaruses of the world are at the gate. They have been ignored and mistreated by their communities. This fact is so well-established that it's practically self-evident. Those who have been served well by our community are being asked to come down out of our sumptuous feasts and be with those outside.

This is the most obvious reading of the parable: we are the ones who need to learn from the rich man's folly of uncaring and hard-heartedness. But the fact of the matter is, most of us aren't filthy rich, most of us actually do some ministry work with the poor. A great many of us here make some attempt at going down to the gate and alleviating the suffering of the Lazaruses in our towns and cities.

That makes me think that we aren't really the rich man in this parable. And we aren't Lazarus. So, who are we? Perhaps we are the rich man's brothers. It might be that Jesus is being coy because someone did come back from the dead to certify the kind of living that God described through Moses and the prophets. We are the brothers, and Lazarus was sent back to warn us.

My friends, Lazarus is at the gate. The truth is, as Jesus tells us, the poor will always be with us. Lazarus will always be at the gate. But what makes Lazarus *Lazarus* is that the rich man does nothing for him. We have an opportunity to *un-write* this parable. We, at this moment, can undo what Jesus describes in this parable, right here.

There is an old rabbinical saying that darkness does not end when the sun rises or when someone lights a candle; instead, darkness ends when you can look into a person's eyes and see the divine. When we look at another person and know that they are God's creation, that's when the darkness will end. We must see others not for what they've done, nor for what they can become, but for their status as a child of God, full stop. That's how we can undo this parable.

All the social improvement plans, all the money that we throw at problems, none of it will make an ounce of difference if we persist in not understanding this fundamental truth: the ones we hate, the ones we resist, the ones we argue with, the ones we kill are God's children and deserving of respect and life.

We are the rich man's brothers. Abraham has somehow allowed Lazarus to come back to our gate to warn us so that we might be brave enough to look at those who are calling for our attention. We must look at them as the children of God that they and we are.

Amen.

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