

The Stories Jesus Told
V. "The Rich Man and Lazarus"
March 17, 2024
Babcock Presbyterian Church

The Prayer for Understanding:

The Witness of the Scripture:

The Gospel: Luke 16:19-31

The Sermon:

In May, Diane will be off to Indonesia. Yes, crazy I know. We are more than amazed ourselves, but her cousin (they are like sisters) has invited her on this trip.

It turns out preparation is much more complicated than a blip over to Europe. She will feel like a pin cushion once her shots are done. We visited a travel clinic; it is quite amazing. They review your itinerary and then select the shots you will need for safety in that country.

They offered, and we bought a travel kit. I have it here; not cheap, but comprehensive. So she is prepared, ready to go, protected, at least so we hope.

The experience got me thinking as I read today's parable. In short: what kind of "Travel Pack" do we need for the Christian Faith?

II.

So first, let's look at the parable to see what Jesus says:

There is a marvelous spiritual that has the words:

"dip your finger in the water,
come and cool my tongue
'cause I'm tormented by the flames."

This is the lament of the rich man who is doing poorly - down deep in the fires of hell - as he looks up to poor Lazarus who now is himself quite well off.

Luke 16:19-31

III.

Parables are wonderful stories! ... some with meanings that disturb and unsettle, others assure and comfort. Always they have meanings that cause us to think about our world, our lives, our relationship with God... and God's relationship with us.

Those who write about this particular text generally lift up the thought that Jesus was thinking about the disparities between rich and poor. Those disparities existed in precisely the same way in Jesus' day as the do now.

But the more I read, the more I wondered if Jesus was talking about much more. With some compelling metaphors, a few bold images, Jesus paints a picture of a rich man strutting around in designer garb. The original GQ guy, he could appear on the pages of Gentlemen's Quarterly.

His undergarment of linen was an expensive Egyptian product that was often called "woven air." I read it was the same fabric used to wrap mummies of Egyptian Pharaohs, prized as highly as gold. His outer garment was purple. According to the Roman author Pliny the Elder, thousands of snails were needed to produce just one ounce of dye. The glands were extracted and placed in a lead pot filled with brine. The pot was heated slowly for about ten days until the mixture turned a reddish-purple. The color of royalty was prohibitively expensive to all but the most wealthy and powerful.

And there was Lazarus... poor beyond description looking out with hollow eyes, his rib cage exposed, begging for what crumbs might come his way, the epitome of poverty and misery as he sat in the dust outside the rich man's gate, starving for some meager scrap of food. Oh we know well the signs of hunger.

The shock in the story comes with the human family's great equalizer: at the death of both men, the tables are turned.

Arriving at their destinations in the new world, the fortunes of each could not have been more reversed: the rich man is in hell and now Lazarus enjoys the extravagance of paradise.

IV.

If the story ended here we could comfortably say this parable was simply a warning to the rich to take care of the poor.

That is, after all, consistent with the teachings of Jesus. Luke's Gospel is full of concerns over the challenge of material possessions. In chapter 12, Jesus says: "to whom much is given, much will be required." (Luke 12:48)

Looking up, the Rich man begs for a little relief; he is not asking for a change of scene, that he knows is impossible, ... he is looking for just a little relief:

“dip your finger in the water,
come and cool my tongue,
‘cause I’m tormented by the flames.”

But this is not possible, the chasm is too great to be crossed.

When that failure, the rich man (who knows the value of negotiation) begs: “Well, Ok, if you say so, I get it, but I plead with you, just warn my five brothers lest they slip into my situation and come to this place of torment.”

V.

So, who does Jesus want us to identify with?

In writing this sermon, I came to feel that we miss the point of this parable if we simply sit in judgment of the rich man - for all of us are rich and at some point, each one of us must face the question of whether we have turned a blind eye to the needs of our neighbor.

Nor is Lazarus the one I think Jesus wants us to be.

Do you know my guess? I think Jesus wants us to identify with the five brothers!

Did you notice? There is that second part of the parable which asks the question:

Will we hear the words of faith and what response
will we make to the claims of God in our lives?

This is a parable which asks us to think about the nature - and the action! - of our faith.

I read an interesting article by Philip Yancey. Yancey talks about an incredibly vital elderly couple he knew. Amazingly, I knew them as well. I met them first at the famous New Wilmington Missionary Conference, in New Wilmington, PA.

Dr. Novel Christy, a Harvard trained, pioneering Ophthalmologist and his wife Dorothy. A Presbyterian who spent a lifetime as a missionary doctor restoring sight to the blind people of India, Pakistan and China. Dr. Christy performed over 100,000 eye surgeries over his career in the Third World; spending his life working in Taxela, India

Novel and Dorothy were in the sixth decade of their marriage. Yancey writes:

“Looking back, from the vantage point, it seems clear that
their mutual response to stormy times was what gave their
marriage its enduring strength.”

“Great relationships take form when they are stretched to the breaking point and do not break.

“I now better understand one of the mysteries of relating to God. Biblical heroes experienced crisis moments when they were sorely tempted to judge God as uncaring, powerless, or even malign. Confused, they faced a turning point: whether to turn away embittered or step forward in faith.

“Some approach God with a consumer spirit: When God performs satisfactorily, he merits our worship, but when God seems distant or unresponsive, why bother?

“Why bother? Because the deepest strength only comes through testing. I have learned that faith means trusting in advance what will only make sense in looking back.”

Faith is the tough decisions that we will make as one of the five brothers in this parable.

Is Jesus asking us where we are, and what decisions we will make, and what we will do with our lives?

It is not too late for us to learn to see. We have Moses and the prophets and we have Jesus to show us. How will we respond?

O Gracious God, you come and give us favor.
You heal our wounds and set us on straight paths.
You are my hope and my deep energizing;
Your grace is spread before me as I walk along.
I'll sing your praise and move through life with courage
I'll tread life's maze secure within your grace.
You take me on with all of my misgivings
Create in us a life that offers all to you.

I think the rich man was asking that his brothers might be open to that. The good news is we already have the travel pack.

Luke 16:19-31 - J.B. Phillips Translation

“There was once a rich man who used to dress in purple and fine linen and lead a life of daily luxury. And there was a poor man called Lazarus who was put down at his gate. He was covered with sores. He used to long to be fed with the scraps from the rich man’s table. Yes, and the dogs used to come and lick his sores.

Well, it happened that the poor man died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham’s bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. And from among the dead he looked up and saw Abraham a long way away, and Lazarus in his arms.

‘Father Abraham!’ he cried out, ‘please pity me. 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 replied, ‘Remember, my son, that you used to have the good things in your lifetime, while Lazarus suffered the bad. Now he is being comforted here, while you are in agony. And besides this, a great chasm has been set between you and us, so that those who want to go to you from this side cannot do so, nor can people come to us from your side.’

At this he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house for I have five brothers. He could warn them about all this and prevent their coming to this place of torture.’

But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets: they can listen to them.’

‘Ah no, Father Abraham,’ he said, ‘if only someone were to go to them from the dead, they would change completely.’

But Abraham told him, ‘If they will not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they would not be convinced even if somebody were to rise from the dead.’”

L: This is the Word of the Lord

C: **Thanks be to God!**