

Let Me Tell You a Story Sermon Series
The Rich Man and Lazarus
Luke 16:19-21
Rev. Kory Wilcoxson

I said last week when introducing this sermon series on the parables of Jesus that most of the parables are clear, but none of them are easy. I tried to start us off with a softball last week – be a wheat, not a weed! Easy to understand, even if it's not always easy to live out. Well, this week, we're leaving the comfortable paved roads and heading onto the bumpy trail of one of Jesus' most perplexing and disturbing parables, which is very clear but nowhere near easy.

I own several textbooks on how to interpret and preach the parables. I was glad to embark on this sermon series because I knew I had those resources in my back pocket to help me make sense of Jesus' stories. Well, in reviewing those textbooks, not one of them had anything to say about this particular parable. Not one. It's as if they were saying to me, "Kory, what are you doing?" So, today we'll be doing a hymn sing! Maureen/Jane, let's sing the first 10 verses of "Amazing Grace."

There's a reason this parable should be handled with kid gloves, if we're brave enough to touch it at all. It paints a very clear picture of who we're called to be, what we're called to do, and what will happen if we don't do it. If we're honest, it's disconcerting and can cause us a lot of anxiety. As one Sermon Talkback participant said on Wednesday, "You're gonna have to talk me back from the ledge on this one." Her fear stems from the fact that the most literal interpretation of this parable is either you help everyone you see or else you're going to Hell. If that's the case, I don't like any of our chances.

One of the ways we can begin to peel back the layers of a parable like this is to talk about what Jesus is not trying to do. Jesus is not trying to do with this parable is lay out a systematic theology of the afterlife. As much as we would like to point to this parable to prove the existence of Heaven or Hell, that's simply not what Jesus is doing here. It would be like reading a cookbook to explain how the mechanics of an oven work. Sure, a cookbook will mention an oven, but that's not the focus. Similarly, what happens to us after we die is not the purpose of this parable. There's no mention of God, no mention of Heaven, and only a reference to Hades, the Greek underworld. So, it's important that we don't put too much weight on this parable to explain something it was never meant to explain.

So, what does this parable tell us? Well, let's see what we know. The two main characters are a rich man and Lazarus. Now, right there we have some important information. We know that, of all of the gospels, Luke is the one that deals the most with wealth and riches, and rarely in a positive light. People who were rich were those who let their bling blind them to authentically living out their faith – think of the rich young ruler who couldn't follow Jesus or the rich people who make a spectacle of how much they gave to church. If you're a rich person in Luke's gospel, you're probably going to be the bad guy.

In contrast, we have the beggar named Lazarus. Can you think of other parables where the characters have names? Not in the good Samaritan. Not in the prodigal son. In fact, not in any other parable. This is the only place in all the gospels where a character in a parable is given a name, Lazarus. By the way, this is not the same Lazarus that Jesus raises from the dead. Naming the beggar will have an important function in this parable. We'll get to that.

The rich man lives his opulent life in his gated community while literally stepping over Lazarus, who lies outside his house, begging for mercy while the dogs lick his wounds. That

detail may feel extreme – why would Jesus mention this? It's to show the depth of depravity in which Lazarus lived. If that sentence makes you go, "Ewww!" then it accomplishes what it is supposed to accomplish.

Both men die and their fortunes are reversed. The rich man goes to a place of fire and torment and Lazarus goes to Father Abraham, literally to Abraham's bosom, where he will be cradled and feed for eternity. The rich man, recognizing his fate, calls out to Abraham to send Lazarus with some water. "Nope," is the response. "You're getting what you deserve, and besides, to quote somebody from New England, 'You can't get there from here'." Both the rich man and Lazarus' fates are sealed, and never the two shall meet. There is a deep chasm between them in death because there was a deep chasm between them when they were alive.

In either a moment of compassionate epiphany or familial selfishness, the rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus to his five siblings to warn them, lest they end up on the hot seat next to them. Abraham says, "They already have Moses and the prophets" – meaning the holy scriptures as they knew it back then. I love the honesty in the rich man's response. "Naw, they don't read that. But if you send a ghost, they'll pay attention!" To which Abraham says, "If they don't read the Bible, what good is it to send someone from the dead?"

Is it too late for that hymn sing? OK, let's see if we can make some sense of this. First of all, let's return to the name thing. One of the reasons Lazarus is named is because it humanizes him. He's not some faceless beggar. He's a person. But the more important reason is that, when the rich man asks Abraham for help, he calls Lazarus by name. He knew him. That's incredibly important here. Lazarus wasn't some shifty hobo taking up space in front of the rich man's mansion. He not only had a name, but the rich man knew it. And yet, he still didn't do anything to help.

That's an important fact for us to consider when we're trying to apply this parable to our own lives. If you take this too literally, you may start to think that unless you help every needy person you ever meet in your entire life, you're going to a place of fire and torment. That worldview can be paralyzing and severely guilt-inducing. But that's not what I hear the parable saying. Instead, I read it to say, "Look around you. If you have people on your radar screen, people at your gate, people whose names you know, people who need your presence and attention and help, then you should help them."

Something that's easy for us to miss about this parable is the way Jesus is reinterpreting the role of wealth and poverty in his culture. The prevailing belief back then was that wealth was a sign of God's blessing and poverty was a sign of God's curse. If you were rich, you did something right to be blessed by God. And if you were poor, you did something wrong to be cursed by God. So, the fact that Lazarus ends up in a good place and the rich man ends up in a bad place would have been quite counter-cultural and deeply upsetting to anyone back then who had money.

If we know anything about Luke, this shouldn't surprise us. It's in his gospel that a pregnant Mary sings that, with the coming of Jesus, "the hungry have been filled and the rich sent away empty." It's also in Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus says, "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God," and follows up with, "Woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your consolation." The challenge Jesus is providing here is for those of us who have much to bridge the chasm between us and those who have little.

I'm inclined to add, "Before it's too late," but I don't want to go too far down that road. First of all, what happens to us after we die isn't determined solely by how many beggars we help or how many little old ladies we walk across the street. That's works righteousness, the

belief we can earn our way into Heaven. That scare tactic has been used for a long time to get people to accept Jesus, but I believe in a God who wants us to come to faith out of love and gratitude, not fear. But we can't just write off the lesson here. The rich man ignored the need around him, and it's only a short journey to go from "ignore" to "ignorant." We are called by this parable to be aware, not ignorant, of the needs around us.

When reading a difficult parable, a good question to ask is, "Who am I in this parable?" We're not Lazarus, that's for sure. And while we may be reluctantly tempted to see ourselves as the rich man, let's all give each other the benefit of the doubt this morning. No, if we look closely at this parable, we are there. We're the five brothers. We're the ones in need of a warning about how we are to live our lives.

So, as those who need a warning, what does parable say to us? It says we already have what we need to know how to live, which is Moses and the prophets. In other words, we have the Bible. If we want to know how we're supposed to treat each other, how we're supposed to share our resources, how we're supposed to value the image of God in each other, we already have that. God has already told us how we are supposed to treat the poor, the immigrant, the outcast. If we're letting some other agenda dictate how we do those things, it's at our own peril.

"But I don't like reading the Bible. It's heavy and it's long and it's boring and I have to finish watching that show on Netflix. It would be easier if God would just send someone back from the dead to show me what to do." Well...guess what? You're in luck, because God did that! God must have known the depth of our ignorance, because God put the words of the Bible into flesh and blood, and even though we pierced that flesh and spilled that blood, we still have the example of Jesus, who loved the poor, we welcomed the immigrant, who accepted the outcast. You wanna know how rich people are supposed to treat poor people? You wanna know how we're all supposed to treat each other, regardless of categories? Look at Jesus.

This isn't about flinging a coin into a cup. This is about a fundamental attitude of neighborliness. It's about seeing the suffering of the poor as our suffering and hearing the call to leave our gated communities and join in solidarity with those who struggle. It's about leaving behind the unhelpful perspectives that poor people are cursed by God and responsible for their own fate and recognizing that we have a role to play and the resources available to honor their humanity and restore their dignity. If we fail to do this, will we go to Hell when we die? I honestly don't know. But I do know we'll be voluntarily separating ourselves from the life-giving call of God on our hearts, hoard the gifts God has given us, hiding from God's presence in our lives. And that in and of itself sounds like Hell to me.

I want to close with the words we've already heard this morning from the prophet Isaiah. You want to know what this parable means? Listen: "Is this not the fast that I have chosen: To loose the bonds of wickedness, To undo the heavy burdens, To let the oppressed go free, And that you break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, And that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out; When you see the naked, that you cover him, And not hide yourself from your own flesh? Then your light shall break forth like the morning, Your healing shall spring forth speedily, And your righteousness shall go before you; The glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; You shall cry, and God will say, 'Here I am.'