

Year C Proper 26 Life With or Without God...Your Choice Luke 16 19 to 31

“There was a rich man...” Today’s Gospel story starts with the exact same words as last week’s Gospel story: “There was a rich man.” In Luke’s Gospel, which heavily focuses on rich people and how they use their wealth, these words signal to us that the rich man and his relationship with God and with God’s kingdom is what we are meant to notice.

Today’s story of Lazarus and the rich man follows on the heels of the words that ended last week’s Gospel story: “You cannot serve both God and money.” The Pharisees who love money sneered at this teaching, we are then told. And Jesus says to them, “You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of others, but God knows your hearts. What people value highly is detestable in God’s sight.” (verse 14-15).

Then he launches into describing the rich man we hear about today – a rich man who clearly values his money more than his relationship with God. This man is described in lavish terms – he is wearing fine linen and robes of purple...the colour of royalty or, at the least, an extremely wealthy, doubtless important community figure, and this man feasts every single day.

How do we know that this man valued his money over his relationship with God? There was a poor man named Lazarus who sat outside the rich man’s gate every single day as the rich man was feasting. Lazarus was hoping that he would get something, anything, a morsel of whatever food was offered...but no morsel was ever offered. The rich man ignored Lazarus’ presence every single day. Only the dogs offered Lazarus a little attention and care by licking his sores.

You may wonder why it is such a big deal that the rich man ignored Lazarus. In addition to the greed and lack of compassion this may show, the rich man was ignoring heavily ingrained social protocols. In those days, benches were actually placed outside of the homes of rich people specifically for the purpose of giving poor people somewhere to sit as they waited for the handouts. And the rich people were absolutely expected to give those handouts. This was the protocol even among those who did not believe in the God of Israel.

This rich man was committing a double-whammy transgression because he *did* believe in the God of Israel and that God had laid out law after law that specifically commanded people with money and property to care for those without means. Just one sample of the multitude of laws that protected the orphans, the widows, the foreigners, and the poor is found in Deuteronomy 14(28-29) God said through Moses, “For the poor will never cease to be in the land; therefore I command you, saying, ‘You shall freely open your hand to your brother, to your needy and poor in your land.’”

This brother, this needy and poor person in his land – right outside his gate, as a matter of fact – was completely ignored by the rich man. Ignored in direct contradiction to the commands of God who desires absolute equality through the love and compassion he himself teaches to us in Jesus Christ.

Interestingly, the poor man in this story is given a name: Lazarus. This humanizes him for us. He is a person in need. He is not the focus of the story though. The focus is on the un-named rich man. The generic references to him simply as the rich man, allows Jesus’ wealthy listeners to place themselves in his shoes. Most of those wealthy listeners were the Pharisees that Jesus had been speaking to earlier. It is the wealthy Pharisees, well-versed in God’s laws yet ignoring them, or twisting them to enable their pursuit of worldly power that Jesus was talking to. Not all Pharisees were like this just like not all Christians need to hear this warning. But for even those of us who believe we are freely opening our hands to those who need us, this is a good reminder and an opportunity for serious self-reflection to ensure that we are doing all that we can do.

There is, in fact, a particularly chilling piece to this story that certainly disturbed the Pharisees then and should shake the complacency today of people who label themselves as Christians but do not live the ways of God’s kingdom. This piece comes when Abraham first addresses the rich man. Abraham calls the rich man, “Child.” A child of Abraham – the phrase should sound familiar. In case you don’t remember where you may have first heard it in Luke’s Gospel, it was way back near the beginning. When John the Baptist saw the Jewish crowds coming out to be baptized, he called them a brood of vipers and said, “...do not begin to say to

yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire" (3:8-9). Those who label themselves but then do not live into that label, have something to worry about.

The rich man was a tree who did not produce good fruit despite being presented with the opportunity to do so day after day after day. And he knew better. He had all that he needed to live the way of God's kingdom. He chose not to. This rich man's brothers have all that they require as well. Abraham says that they have "Moses and the prophets" which means, like the rich man, they know all of God's commands passed along to them through Moses and they also have the words of the prophets. The prophets were continuously warning God's people to follow these commandments, to live the way they were supposed to live with love and equality and abundance for everyone.

We, like them, have what we need to enable us to live the life of God's kingdom, to enable us to have the loving, caring relationship with God that is characterized for us in the story by Abraham's caring embrace of Lazarus after his death. Our God is a God of second chances. The rich man had chance after chance, day after day, but day after day he chose to keep his abundance for himself, never once reaching out in care to the sick and hungry poor man just outside his gate.

Both men died. That is the end in store for everyone – rich or poor; healthy or sick, famous or unknown. Death awaits all of us. What happens to us after our deaths is our choice made by the way we lived. This "after death" story Jesus tells us is not meant to be taken literally but it holds some important truths that we are meant to notice. We are not told what kind of a person Lazarus was. We must presume that he loved God and followed God's ways because he ended up in God's presence when he died. We also know that Lazarus was a victim of the inequalities of society that came about as a result of God's people not following God's commands. As I have mentioned before, the commands of God are aimed at fulfilling his purpose – keeping the playing field level, ensuring that all people have what they need: food, shelter, clothing, love and justice.

The rich man – because he was contributing to the inequalities of society by not following God’s commands – he ended up separated from God’s presence when he died. Paul writes, in his second letter to the Thessalonians, that “those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus... will be...shut out from the presence of the Lord” (2 Thess.1:8-9). Shut out from the presence of the Lord is punishment indeed – especially when you realize what you’re missing and that it’s your own fault in the end. This realization torments the rich man. Yet even then, when he knows that if he had lived by God’s ways and had opened his hand to the poor and to the needy he’d be in Abraham’s embrace too, even then, he does not change and is unable, therefore, to “cross the chasm” between them. He hasn’t changed. He asks Abraham to send Lazarus over to him so that Lazarus can *serve* him. There is no acknowledgement of the equality among humanity and no sign of the love that we are to bear for one another.

As we hear this story told by Jesus today, we see the plight of the rich man, the joy of Lazarus, and we – fortunately – are in the place of the rich man’s five brothers, alive and able to choose which way things go for us when we do die.

The problem is, our society doesn’t make it easy for us to make the right choice – the choice to live according to the ways of God’s kingdom. The problem – and the danger for us – is that we will choose to believe the message of the world around us, that ‘God helps those who help themselves,’ a message that many people wrongly believe is in the Bible. The danger is that we will choose to ignore Jesus’ message that God helps those who *cannot* help themselves. The name “Lazarus” actually means “God helps”. The danger is that we will fail to recognize the voice of the prophets among us warning us to open our hands and our hearts to those in need.

The problem is that many Christians very much buy into the same thinking that Jesus’ audience did – riches were a sign of God’s approval and reward. “Christians Prosper” says one bumper sticker. Sickness and poverty were a sign of God’s disapproval. Wealth is the reward of the virtues of hard work and intelligence. Poor people lack drive and are idle rather than industrious.

A great preacher by the name of Barbara Brown Taylor tells us that society has convinced us “that the chief person we are responsible for is ourselves. We have been put on earth to love our neighbours, but changing their lot in life is up to them, not us, especially in a culture like ours that puts so much stock in individual initiative. The great...myth is that anyone willing to work hard can win first prize.” None of this is true. “It might be true if everyone were standing at the same starting line when the gun went off, but that is never the case. Some start from so far back that they can run until their lungs burst and never even see the dust of the front runners. Those are the hardest cases.” She continues, “I think people who have inherited poverty as surely as they have inherited brown hair or blue eyes, hear the starting gun go off and do not even know which way to run. Not that it matters. They do not have the right shoes, cannot pay the registration fee, never got a copy of the rules, and are in terrible shape anyway. Other people look at them and think, ‘losers’. It has been going on for so long that even people who start much further ahead in the race believe that the difference between themselves and others is so great that it is almost like God had something to do with it.” Best to leave well enough alone. This kind of thinking even has a name. It’s called “health and wealth theology” and Jesus couldn’t stand it.

Jesus’ story today would have come as a shock to his listeners with its role reversal. The poor man ended up in God’s presence at death and the rich man did not. Jesus undoubtedly enjoyed shocking his money-loving listeners but he also wanted to do more. To return to Barbara Brown Taylor once more, she writes that even when Jesus got angry, he got angry for a reason, “usually because he could not stand the way people loved the things they could get for themselves better than they loved the things God wanted to give them. They were satisfied with linen suits and sumptuous feasts when God wanted to give them the kingdom. They were content to live in the world with beggars when God wanted to give them brothers and sisters. They were happy to get by with the parts of the Bible that backed up their own ways of life when God wanted to give them a new life altogether.”

We have deeply ingrained ways of thinking as a society that cut us off from one another and from God. We see our good fortunes as God’s blessings and do not

see how our lives are quilted together with all other lives. We do not need to worry what *God* will do to us. *We* are the ones who build the chasm. God always invites. God always waits. But we hear God say, in Psalm 81 (10-12): “Open wide your mouth, and I will fill it. But My people would not listen to Me, and Israel would not obey Me. So I gave them up to their stubborn hearts to follow their own devices.” *So I gave them up to their stubborn hearts to follow their own devices.*

The best thing about today’s story is that it is not over. It’s over for the rich man but not for us, his brothers. “Even though Abraham would not let Lazarus come back from the grave to tell us this story, Jesus has sneaked it out for us. Now we have that as well as Moses and the prophets and someone who *is* risen from the dead to convince us it is true. All that remains to be seen is what we will do about it.”<sup>1</sup>

Here is a prayer to help us, written by Walter Brueggemann in his book called *Prayers for a Privileged People*. It is a “Prayer of Illumination” (p.179):

Truth-telling, wind-blowing, life-giving spirit –  
 we present ourselves now  
     for our instruction and guidance;  
 breathe your truth among us,  
     breathe your truth of deep Friday loss,  
         your truth of awesome Sunday joy.  
 Breathe your story of death and life  
     that our story may be submitted to your will for life.  
 We pray in the name of Jesus risen to new life –  
     and him crucified. Amen.

We have Moses and the prophets and someone risen from the dead. Let’s listen to them.

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<sup>1</sup> The material from Barbara Brown Taylor is taken from her sermon called, “A Fixed Chasm” in *Bread of Angels*, pp.109-113.