

A Messenger of Love

Luke 16: 9-31

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September 25, 2016
Burlington, VT

Every story comes from somewhere. My story comes from my life. Your story comes from your life. This church's story comes from its long history in this place. Yet today we have one of Jesus' stories that seems to begin and end in limbo. There is no setting, no speaker, no apparent purpose. Why did Jesus tell it?

If you heard last week's gospel, we are in the same place: still with Jesus sitting around the dinner table with a bunch of Pharisees as well as some of the undesirables that Jesus always invited. They already been disagreeing about many things, and Jesus is trying to show them what it really means to follow God's law. They are used to simply admiring their own supposed "righteousness" and labelling everyone else, especially those who are marginalized, as a sinner. The Pharisees are not being persuaded by Jesus' arguments, and they laugh at him dismissively

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But Jesus is nothing if not persistent. He launches into this parable about the poor, sick, dying man named Lazarus. In the story a richly dressed wealthy man just walks past him on his doorstep every day, never making the effort to bring him food or clothing from his own abundance. Lazarus goes to be with Father Abraham, and the rich man goes to Hades.

The lesson is crystal clear to me, don't you agree? All Jewish scriptures teach over and over again that anyone who is in covenant with Yahweh MUST do the right thing and take care of that needy person at our door. To simply walk by without helping is not an option in God's eyes. And so when Lazarus dies, from neglect, the score is kept, and the rich man must face the judgment upon his own death. No mercy for Lazarus on earth, no mercy for you in the next world.

One of things that always sticks with me from this story is that even after the rich man – who you must notice has no name - is burning in hell, he still doesn't get it. Suddenly he knows the name of the poor man who died on his doorstep, who even though he's now in a place of honor next to Father Abraham, the rich man still thinks of him as a slave, someone whose only reason for living is to serve the wealthy. "Send Lazarus to cool my tongue with a bit of water." No one will miss him, the rich man implies; he's practically invisible, anyway. I never could see him when I walked by all those years. Send him as a messenger of your love.

The rich man is thick-headed, isn't he?. What is it that he cannot see? That dwelling in God's beloved kingdom is about being pure of heart, and that the poor man is now the one who has the advantage. Abraham explains it. Giving up on himself, the rich man thinks about his family, all those siblings who have also had all the advantages of a privileged life on earth. "Send Lazarus to warn them!" he cries.

Ever the pragmatist, Father Abraham replies: Besides the fact that you can't get there from here, people on earth have had plenty of warnings.

They have all the laws in the Torah, and they have all the words of the prophets who constantly remind them of the laws of the covenant. Even someone coming back from the dead – like Lazarus the poor man, or like Lazarus the brother of Mary and Martha, or like Jesus himself – none of these will convince them.

This is really just a Jewish folktale, a straightforward explanation of ethics: all of us who say we are in covenant with God have a social obligation to help. Not giving charity to those in desperate need is the same thing as breaking up with God. Ignoring the poor is not an option. Any Jewish person listening to Jesus' story would understand that just by being oblivious to Lazarus as a human being, by stepping past him on the doorstep, he was therein cutting himself off from God.

In our modern times, we make it a lot harder to see the dying Lazarus on our doorsteps. We shoo them away. As for the homeless, or the elderly, we put them in shelters far from the downtown.. If they are on the streets as homeless addicts, then we move them away from Church Street so the tourists won't have to look at them. How can we be compassionate – be merciful – toward those people whom we cannot – or will not – see?

We demand some kind of miracle that shakes us into seeing, into caring about the poor. Let Lazarus come back to life and warn us, tell us that it is a life of compassion that will bring us to God's side. Maybe if those Pharisees would just see the miracles Jesus performs....

But the answer is not the miracles: it is the way we live everyday life. It is allowing our hearts to be transformed by being in contact with those who suffer. The rich man's sin was not so much being rich: it was his obliviousness to pain and the desperate needs of another human being.

The only thing that can make us, the "rich men" of the world to see the truth is the example of Jesus' compassion lived among us. It is the heart of Jesus that transforms us. We can see the One who feels the pain of the blind man beside the road, the pain of the woman whose daughter was dying, the poor leper who lies helpless by the gate. Jesus was always present with these people, crying their tears, holding their hands, naming their names. Jesus - alive and living in the world- is the messenger of God's love in action, and invites us to imitate.

What does it mean for us to also be messengers of love in the world? How can we fulfill the covenant by caring for those in need? How do we give up our wealth, our privilege? Must we to give away everything we own?

It is not about that first and foremost a vow of poverty. But if we really spend time with Lazarus on the doorstep, we will begin to let go of other things, of material wealth, voluntarily.

The recently sainted Mother Teresa is a good example. She never really "cured" people . Very often she was simply just present with Lazarus and every other human being dying on the street. She focused on being a loving presence, reminding them of God's love.

I did Clinical Pastoral Education at the state mental hospital in Hawaii. There were severally ill, heavily medicated young men in the forensic locked ward. Often they would just sit and play cards for hours on end. I despaired of my inability to “get through” to them, and really be of help. My very wise supervisor reminded me that the “ministry of presence”, the ministry of noticing and caring, was the most important thing that I could do. And he was right. It made all the difference.

I hope all of us will let the blinders fall from our eyes, so that we might truly see and understand our position of privilege in this world, and give from the compassion of our hearts as we seek to build the kingdom of God in this place.

19 ‘There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. 20And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, 21who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. 22The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham.* The rich man also died and was buried. 23In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side.* 24He called out, “Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.” 25But Abraham said, “Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. 26Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.” 27He said, “Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house— 28for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.” 29Abraham replied, “They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.” 30He said, “No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.” 31He 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.” ’

