

Walk Out the Gate

Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus

Luke 16:19-31

Rev Kimiko Karpoff, diaconal minister

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This story of the rich man and Lazarus is deceptive in its simplicity. One man is exceedingly wealthy. He wears purple, a colour so rare and precious that even many noble people cannot afford it. The cloth is linen, a luxury fabric. He doesn't just dine, but feasts sumptuously every day. You can imagine the spread - roasted lamb, fresh figs, olives, bread, stewed fowl, sweets, wine, food abundant in variety and flavour. He lives in a house with a gate, which suggests an estate or a compound.

The other man, Lazarus, was not simply impoverished, as most people were in those days, with a kind of daily sustenance living. He was even worse off than that. He was beyond the ability to work, worn out and tossed away. I don't just say that to be dramatic. The Greek word that was used, that we translate as "lay" when we read that Lazarus lay outside his gate, that word means thrown down. It implies that he was likely a cripple put there by other people. And it also carries with it a deeper meaning about being discarded by society. Lazarus longs just for a crumb from the rich man's table. But he gets nothing.

In due course both men die. Lazarus, the poor man, gets carried away by angels to rest in the comfort of our great forefather Abraham. The rich man is buried and ends up in the torment of Hades, the underworld.

When we hear this story we can feel vicariously vindicated. After all we know this stuff. We know that God wants us to be generous with our abundance, that God would not have us flaunt our wealth, but share it.

This story, when we hear it through our 21 Century, western Christian ears, doesn't shock us at all. It's exactly what we would expect. A wealthy man ignores the plight of the poor man outside his door. When he dies, he goes to Hades while the poor man lives out eternity in the comfort of the bosom of Abraham. Each receives his just desserts.

However, to the people hearing this story in the time of Jesus, this story was shocking. Shocking! Completely unexpected. Because in their world view of the

time, wealth was seen as God-given, just as poverty was.

David Henson explains it like this, "In the popular theology of the day, wealth wasn't at the root of all kinds of evil. They wouldn't have seen the rich man as a villain initially. Rather, wealth was a sign of God's blessing. One needed to look no further than the father of all Jews, Abraham. He was an exceedingly wealthy man, and the Hebrew Scriptures are clear that his wealth was indeed a blessing from God. So, in that tradition, the wealthy in Jesus' time — many of whom were religious elites and priests — thought of themselves in a direct kinship line from Abraham, inheriting by proxy his wealth and promise."

[<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/davidhenson/2013/09/radical-reversals-lazarus-abraham-and-the-myth-of-the-righteous-rich-a-homily/> (referencing Herzog)]

So for the people in Jesus' time to hear that the rich man ends up tormented while the poor man gets to hang around with Abraham, would have been a startling reversal of expectation. What does that say, then, when the wealthy are punished in death while the poor are rewarded?

On the surface, this story can read as an exemplary tale. It can seem to be an example of what will happen if we are not generous.

But this is not simply a story, it is a parable. And a parable, by definition, is supposed to be earth-shaking. It is supposed to rock the very ground of our being, because such is the advent of the kingdom of God. So we need to look a little deeper. And the parable itself directs us to do that.

So what happens after everyone gets sent to their allocated spots in the after life? We witness a conversation between the rich man and Abraham. The rich man looks up from his torment in Hades and he sees Lazarus sitting with Abraham. He SEES Lazarus.

Now Lazarus has been sitting outside this man's gate for who knows how long. We might have even given him the benefit of the doubt that he hadn't noticed Lazarus there. But here we see that he knows Lazarus by name. He calls by name this man whom he has ignored outside his gate.

And this man, who has ignored Lazarus's longing for even a crumb from the table, has the audacity to ask Abraham to send Lazarus to dip his finger in water and cool his tongue. Now this is not just "can I have a cup of water," but a plea to have Lazarus dip his finger in water to cool the rich man's tongue.

We start to notice a shift in this section of the parable. This is not simply the

reversal of fortune, but it is a shift in relationship. We begin to see elements of kinship. The rich man calls out "Father Abraham." Abraham responds, calling him "child." They have established with these few words an intimate and familial relationship. At the same time Lazarus is there with Abraham in an intimate embrace, by his side, "in the bosom of Abraham" in some of our more poetic translations of this text. You can imagine a father picking up a child to comfort him. Again a very intimate and familial kind of image.

So if both Lazarus and the rich man have this relationship with Abraham, this father/child relationship, that makes their relationship to each other one of kin, brothers even. And in the culture of the time it would be understood that kin look after each other.

This doesn't necessarily draw us away from this notion of generosity. So I want to go just a little deeper, looking at it through the context of the Christian story.

Now people understand Jesus in different ways, and this is only one way. But I ask you to follow me on this path.

Jesus is a divine revelation of God. God made Jesus manifest to come into the world in a relational way. Jesus gave up his presumably lovely life in the cosmos to become as a human and live a human experience in all its pain, poverty and beauty.

We might presume that God could have done anything, but this is what God chose - life in relationship with us, through Jesus.

Let's draw that down into the context of the parable. The rich man would have been understood, in those days, to have been divinely blessed by God. That's why he is rich. So he is, in a sense, living in the divine kingdom on earth. Jesus lived in the actual divine kingdom, this rich man lived in the earthly one.

In the same way that Jesus is called to cross the divide and live an earthly relationship, so too was the rich man. Yet he did not. He did not walk outside the gate and see Lazarus. He did not sit down and talk to Lazarus. He certainly did not invite Lazarus to eat at his table. These are things that we witnessed Jesus do over and over, all through the gospels. He went out and he invited. He went out and he healed. He spoke to people. He ate with everyone.

From the moment of the creation of the garden, God is about relationship, about kinship. And relationship is a two-way thing. A real relationship is about give and

take, not master and servant. Simply being generous without entering into relationship is not the kingdom of God.

This relates to the African concept of ubuntu which I have spoken about before. Ubuntu is a Zulu word that in its briefest means  am because we are." Archbishop Desmond Tutu expanded on this, describing ubuntu as:

"the essence of being human. It speaks of the fact that my humanity is caught up and is inextricably bound up in yours. A person with ubuntu is  open and available to others, willing to be vulnerable, affirming of others.  They know that they are diminished when others are humiliated, diminished when others are oppressed, diminished when others are treated as if they were less than who they are."

So I wonder if the reversal of expectation is when the rich man realizes that his very humanness depends on his relationship to and interaction with Lazarus. Lazarus, he sees, provides something that he lacks, that can only be redeemed through an intimate act of kinship. Suddenly all of those comforts of wealth are nothing compared to this act of human interaction, a drop of water from a fingertip.

So what does that say to us? Perhaps it says that God calls us into relationship. And not a relationship of giving, but a relationship of receiving. The rich man only recognizes his own humanity when he recognizes that Lazarus has something that he longs for.

In our culture we are so arrogant. We believe that we know what is good for everyone else. We go on mission tours to build things that we think will help others. We go to the outreach ministry to offer a bit of our time and wealth to those less fortunate. But what Jesus modeled and what this story points to, is relationship. Walking out the door and past our gate, not to hand Lazarus bread, but to sit with Lazarus and receive what he has to offer us. It might mean listening to someone else's understanding of salvation. Maybe we need to let go of our own certainty and hear how others have been blessed.

We could learn from other cultures, from people whose experience is different than ours. We could learn the value of ubuntu. Perhaps we need to walk outside the gates of our own comfort and enter into relationship with that which challenges us. Perhaps that is the ground-shaking, world turned upsidedown, kingdom of God message for us.

May it be so.