

Proper 21C

Luke 16:19-31

Jesus said, "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He 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.' But 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. Besides 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.' He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house-- for I have five brothers-- that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.' Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.' He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' He 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.'"

When I saw that I would be preaching on the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, my first reaction was "I can't preach this text!" I don't believe in hell; I don't believe in a God who would eternally torment anyone. Not only that, I can't believe in a heaven where I must endure the cries of those being eternally tormented and not being able to do anything about it. I mean, this might be someone's idea of justice, but where is love, mercy and forgiveness? Where is the Good News in this parable?

Oh yeah, *parable*. A story used to illustrate the truths about God and shed light on how we are to live. I get caught up with the stories every time. Parables are not meant to be a historical account; in this case, a story of two individuals and their experience of the afterlife. Remember the last time I preached, I mentioned that I had learned that when the story doesn't make sense, we must look at the context and to go deeper to look for the truths. Something I have to learn again and again, apparently.

This parable comes right after the parable of the dishonest manager that we heard last week. In between these parables, Luke tells us: "The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him. Here's the "set up" again. You know the Pharisees aren't going to look good when Jesus gets done with the story.

Now, I am sure you have heard many sermons on this text; the lesson is usually that we must stand in solidarity with the poor and suffering. God forbid, you have probably heard this text used to scare you into right conduct for fear of eternal damnation (although, hopefully, never in The Episcopal Church!).

But I don't think this text is about the evil of hoarding money. That was last week's lesson. I think Luke is building on the story of the dishonest manager to tell us something more about God's reign. I think Luke is saying that *like* the evil of hoarding money, there is something else we hoard to our detriment. Could this be a lesson about not hoarding spiritual wealth?

I want to give credit where it is due as to how I got here. I shared the text with the youth at our gathering last Sunday evening. I asked "what word or phrase or idea jumps out for you? Lydia said "sumptuously," as in "the rich man feasted sumptuously." For Caroline, it was "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." It got me to thinking: *Rich in spirit v. poor in spirit*.

Reading commentaries, I learned that purple is the color for royalty, and that the wearing of linen was prescribed for priests in Exodus 28:39. Thus, the rich man was a symbol of royalty and the priesthood. He is a symbol of the Israelites, not only because he prayed to "Father Abraham," but notice that he had five brothers. The founder of the Israelite Tribe of *Judah*, was *Judah, son of Jacob and Leah*. He had five, full blooded brothers. Genesis 35:23. And remember, also, that God chose the Israelites to be his special people. As St. Paul explained, "to them belong the adoption, the glory, and the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises." Romans 9:4.

They were rich, sumptuously rich in spirit.

Lazarus, on the other hand, symbolizes all the people in spiritual poverty, like the Gentiles of first century Palestine. The rich man feasted sumptuously at his table every day, but

“At his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed *to satisfy his hunger* with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores.”

So poor in spirit.

And didn’t this bring to mind another story, where Jesus tested the faith of the Canaanite woman who came to seek healing for her daughter:

She came and knelt before him, saying, ‘Lord, help me.’ He answered, ‘It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’ She said, ‘Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.’ Then Jesus answered her, ‘Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.’ And her daughter was healed instantly. Matthew 15:25-28.

You see, the Israelites were to go out and share their heritage. They all knew scripture, and especially Isaiah: “I will give you as a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” Isaiah 49:6. Unfortunately, the Israelites had not shared their spiritual wealth with the Gentiles. Instead, they treated them as “dogs” who would have to be satisfied with the spiritual crumbs falling from their master’s table.

In the parable of the dishonest manager, Jesus tells of a rich man being entrusted with material goods, and accused him of having “wasted his goods.” He then opened up the lesson of being entrusted with the truth. In today’s parable, Jesus has described a rich man being entrusted with spiritual wealth and shows how he has wasted it, just as the manager had been unfaithful with physical wealth.

As stewards of a special message of truth, we are being unfaithful if we do not share it, especially with those who are hungry for it. So, this parable is about the Israelites -- and here I am speaking of the religious leaders, the Pharisees in particular – who enjoyed all of God’s blessings on earth and no further reward was due them. But the Gentiles, those who hungered and thirsted after righteousness would be filled.

But there’s more. The rich man pleads with Father Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers – to warn the nation of Israel. But Abraham tells them “if they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”

I... know someone who was raised from the dead!

God had more hope than Abraham because the story didn’t end here. Luke tells us the first thing Christ did after his resurrection.

If you recall, two travelers are leaving Jerusalem on the road to Emmaus. They are joined by the risen Christ, whom they did not recognize. Thinking him to be another traveler, they tell them about the prophet Jesus. They had believed to be the one to redeem Israel, but he had been handed over to the authorities and killed.

Jesus interpreted the things about himself in the scripture, beginning with *Moses and all the prophets*. He told of a God who wanted an end to idolatry and a reunion with humankind enough to give up, and raise up his son to make it happen. Jesus opened up the scriptures to the travelers, and he blessed and broke bread with them.

It is indeed a sumptuous feast, but this one has no gates or chasms. Jesus is with them and they begin to see the redemption of Israel and the nations for which they had hoped and thought was lost. There is something much greater than money: there is love and trust. Here is the risen Christ, creating around himself a community that reads scripture, blesses, eats and proclaims the good news, “We have seen the Lord.”

So, if we accept the truths in today’s parable, how are we to live? Should we proclaim the good news, this message of salvation? Should we invite others to share our spiritual inheritance?

How will you share your spiritual blessings?