

September 25, 2022
The Ways of Jesus: The Chasm
The Rich Man and Lazarus
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This week's sermon scripture is...interesting. You know, there have been times during these sermon series adventures that Rev. Becker takes us on, where I have gotten to pick the text for the week. Remember Encanto!? Wasn't that a great day!? OK Well, Today is not that. Today hurts a little. So, let me invite you friends, into the weeds I've been living in the last week or so, and let's see if together we can glean some usefulness from this strange parable together.

The Rich Man and Lazarus

¹⁹ "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰ And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹ who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²² The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. ^[g] The rich man also died and was buried. ²³ In Hades, where he was being tormented, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. ^[h] ²⁴ 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.’²⁵ 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.’²⁶ 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.’²⁷ He said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house—²⁸ for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’²⁹ Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’³⁰ He said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’³¹ 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.’ ”

Sheesh. It’s a lot. And as if to add insult to injury it comes just on the heels of our actual favorite parable, the prodigal son, and the parable Kelley gave us about the lost sheep. We’ve got instead a rich man with much and a poor man with nothing. And the two of them changing places in the afterlife. And heaven and hell, and Abraham! So before we take a deeper dive let’s remember a few things about parables and this one in particular -

David Lose, former seminary president and professor of preaching at Luther seminary, reminds us that, “a parable is a parable, not a complete systematics. Parables aren’t told to give us a complete theological system or to address ultimate questions once and for all. They are meant to give us a glimpse — often surprising, or even jarring glimpses — into the kin-dom of God. They present various insights of the “kin-dom logic” of the God who regularly surprises us with God’s compassion and concern.” Sometimes, like in the case of today’s they are meant to stir the listener to a change, whether it be of heart or thought.

The second thing to keep in mind is that this parable isn’t actually interested in explaining to us how people get to heaven, or even what heaven and hell are like. The parable instead seems to be interested in how those with much care for those with little. This parable seems to push God’s unrelenting care and compassion for the poor and vulnerable to the extreme, and so that is what should actually grab our attention. The care of the poor which is so consistently present in the Hebrew bible and the New Testament but inconsistently present in the thoughts and actions of the rich man.

In the ancient world, and today, it is common to equate wealth with virtue.

Good people who work hard and live righteously can expect to be rewarded with

means; likewise, people with means are seen as good (smart, hardworking, and righteous) because they were able to acquire wealth. In the ancient world, concepts like wealth, virtue, and masculinity worked together and reinforced one another to solidify elite status. However, the idea that the rich man is a good man is directly challenged by this parable. The rich man, who is not named here, overlooks Lazarus who sits with his sores at the rich man's gate. And not just once. Day in and day out, Lazarus watches as the rich man hosts feasts and receives nothing.

In the ancient world part of the role of the wealthy was to provide alms for the poor in their community. Often there was a bench outside homes where the poor could wait for assistance. A beggar who sat on this bench at the gate could expect some sort of attention, especially from a feasting host. Patronage was an expected means for some of the poor to be fed, and for better or worse, the wealthy, by their participation in almsgiving, reinforced their elite status. It was how society worked. Your support of the poor gained you even more prestige. But even this prestige doesn't seem to motivate dear old Mr. Rich Man. As verse 19 says, this particular rich man feasted every day, meaning Lazarus was denied many times as the rich man repeatedly ignored the unwritten codes of honor.

It is unknown if the rich man ignored the suffering of Lazarus intentionally or unintentionally, but what we do know as readers is that Lazarus was not invisible to him. He knew his name. He knew his face. Both of which he recognizes in the afterlife. But, even in the afterlife, the rich man isn't concerned for Lazarus. He sees him still as less than and reduces him to the role of a servant. "Send Lazarus to fetch me a drop of water and to warn my brothers." The rich man, continues to fail to treat Lazarus as a person, as an equal, as one deserving of compassion and regard. Let alone one with enough worth to have such a close seat with Abraham.

It is here that Abraham reveals that there is nothing to be done for a great chasm exists that separates them from one another.

Alex cue the dramatic music! Ok, just kidding.

It's the chasm that has me wondering all sorts of things.

Let's note what Abraham doesn't say. He doesn't say I have laid a chasm.

Abraham says, '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.²⁶ 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.'

So sorry Mr. Rich man, even if we wanted to help you – we can't. If we are reading between the lines it would seem the chasm was created by the rich man himself. And while Abraham only mentions that receiving good things is what created it, I have to wonder if the chasm has become fixed because the rich man day in and day out was building the chasm with the way he lived his life.

Either in the rich man's unwillingness to see Lazarus as a person, or his unintentional failure to notice, feast by feast, day by day the rich man was about the work of building the chasm himself. And I know the literal chasm is between heaven and hell in the parable but really what the rich man is building is a barrier between himself and Lazarus. A barrier from being in relationship with Lazarus.

But you know what friends? This is where the text becomes arduous for me to preach.

Because it would seem this backwards parable is intended to remind the audience that those with much, should share much. It's as if the central character of the story isn't the rich man or Lazarus at all. But its first hearers and you and me. This

parable shines a light on the sin of indifference or the sin of willful ignorance. For it is the parable that reminds us that we are the ones who have the law and the prophets and have seen God's compassion lived out in the life and ministry of Jesus. We are the ones who gather each week to spread a table of welcome and to recommit to serving Bartlesville and the world with justice, love, and care. We are the ones who know about abundance and strive to live from it.

This parable isn't about earning or relinquishing an eternal reward; it's about the character and quality of our life right now. It's about choosing to see what the rich man couldn't. You see, seeing, in this Gospel, is a very big deal. See what I did there? Before you can have compassion for people, you have to *see* them, acknowledge their presence, needs, and gifts and above all their status of children of God worthy of respect and dignity. It's not black or white, life is unnuanced, but it does seem to be about choice and how we live on this side of the story in such a way that creates equity for all people. But it would seem WE are the central characters of the story.

Which is why this sermon is so difficult to preach – mostly because its to all of you.

All of you who time and again have seen people. You have met needs when they have arisen, you have asked what else can be done to help? At every turn you have reminded me of Max Goodwin from New Amsterdam and have asked how can I help? Never mind you helped last week, never mind the fixed incomes, or the tight budgets.

I could stand up here and give you the numbers about the literal chasm between the rich and the poor in this country and how it continues to widen, I could talk to you about food insecurity and appeal to your hearts about how people end up there. We could talk about all sorts of other inequalities too. But, I don't need to. Because you have heard the stories of people living in the chasm. You know already that families are one fire or one medical diagnosis away from being Lazarus and being dependent on others. You have stories you could share with me. You SEE what is happening. You have not become the rich man whose vision is short sighted or blinded. You DCC refuse to be blinded to the neighbors all around us who need help. And here's the other thing. You aren't concerned about your eternal destiny when you say yes. Or when you show up. I mean maybe you are but that's not my experience of you. My experience is that when you show up it is in love to care for other's.

So this sermon is perplexing because none of that needs to be revealed here.

Perhaps though, we need the reminder. And the encouragement that the work you do matters and is noticed. You friends, are making a difference in the lives of people. I do not want you to forget that. Because we cannot begin to counteract the injustices in the world if we let ourselves stop seeing God's children who are suffering. Both in the ancient world and now doing this work can be messy. There are some needs that can be met, and others that cannot. There are things we can do and things we cannot control. And yet, Jesus calls us to continue the work. Certainly, this text could be heard as a warning not to overlook those in need, but for us what I hear is an invitation to stay the course. That in so doing we are living fuller, more meaningful and more joyous lives by sharing ourselves, our time, talents, and certainly our wealth, with those around us here and now. For as we do, we manifest the Kingdom of God. Amen.