

The Rich Man & Lazarus

Luke 16:19-31

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St. Mary the Virgin

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¹⁹ "There was a certain rich man who clothed himself in purple and fine linen, and who feasted luxuriously every day. ²⁰ At his gate lay a certain poor man named Lazarus who was covered with sores. ²¹ Lazarus longed to eat the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table. Instead, dogs would come and lick his sores. ²² "The poor man died and was carried by angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³ While being tormented in the place of the dead, he looked up and saw Abraham at a distance with Lazarus at his side. ²⁴ He shouted, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me. Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I'm suffering in this flame.' ²⁵ But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received good things, whereas Lazarus received terrible things. Now Lazarus is being comforted and you are in great pain. ²⁶ Moreover, a great crevasse has been fixed between us and you. Those who wish to cross over from here to you cannot. Neither can anyone cross from there to us.' ²⁷ "The rich man said, 'Then I beg you, Father, send Lazarus to my father's house. ²⁸ I have five brothers. He needs to warn them so that they don't come to this place of agony.' ²⁹ Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets. They must listen to them.' ³⁰ The rich man said, 'No, Father Abraham! But if someone from the dead goes to them, they will change their hearts and lives.' ³¹ Abraham said, 'If they don't listen to Moses and the Prophets, then neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead.'" (CEB)

One of the most difficult tasks in reading a familiar parable is to read what's really there and not read into it what we have heard about it in the past. In this task I have been greatly aided by the work of Amy-Jill Levine¹, a Jewish Feminist New Testament scholar who teaches at Vanderbilt and now in the summer at Hartford International University for Religion and Peace, formerly simply Hartford Seminary. I highly recommend her scholarship. It is readable and makes sense. She challenges us to understand the Jewish context in which Jesus, a Jew, told his stories. She is particularly helpful in removing our unconscious antisemitism from our reading of the Gospels. Everything I say today is influenced by her scholarship.

We have typically seen this as a parable castigating the unfeeling Jewish contemporaries of Jesus and assumed that were we the man of wealth then we would've behaved differently. The reality is that the Rich Man is not meant to be indicative of what first century Jews were like but instead he is indicative of the reality that wealth is

¹ Short Stories by Jesus.

no indicator of blessing. To restate more bluntly: This parable illustrates that Yahweh has an absolute preference for the poor.

The reference to Moses and the Prophets drives home the point that Jesus was citing Jewish practice and then pointing out how the Rich Man wasn't following it. On this level the parable tells us that our future is dependent today on how we treat the least among us. I know most of you and you have heard me before so what I'm about to say won't be discontinuous with what I've said in other sermons.

To speak of a contemporary issue for instance: Does this parable have anything to say about how we accept and treat refugees who are crossing the Southern Border? Are the self-proclaimed Christian Governors of Texas and Florida living out their faith when they make the helpless into political pawns and send them to the liberal north? It seems to me that we are being told by many of the loudest Christian voices that the Gospel is above all about power and protecting White Privilege and worshipping power and White Privilege means we can treat the poor and the brown as pawns. I disagree. Instead the gospel is clear that we are to worry first about saving them and only secondarily, at best, about our issues with immigration. Helping the helpless always trumps² worry about there being enough or about whether or not we have eliminated all chance of a threat to our way of life. Of course Christian Nationalist Politicians will worry about security and preserving power and white America. In the face of this nationalistic concern, faithful Christians have to pressure them to extend compassion. These actions against the migrants are of course a setup for the midterms and especially for the next presidential election. This heretical understanding of Christianity values power and white skin color over the people the gospel values most, the poor and helpless. Our pressure on the government to be more compassionate must be unrelenting. That I believe this way is doubtless not a surprise to anyone who has ever heard me preach. So substitute the governors of Florida and Texas, and their fearful supporters, for the Rich Man³.

On the other hand this parable makes me extremely uncomfortable. This parable challenges everything I think about Salvation. This parable clearly, as frequently, talks about the reality of judgment. We see something similar in the Matthean apocalypse⁴ where Jesus separates the sheep from the goats. In the Gospels judgment is real and choices we make count. I believe, but can't find it in today's text, that there is nothing that can separate us from the Love of God. As you may have tired of hearing me say I turn to Lewis's The Great Divorce for my understanding. So a primary challenge today is how do I be faithful to the text and preach on what's there rather than what I certainly wish were there? What is in the text is a clarion call to preach of the reality of judgment and its relationship to the treatment of the poor.

The Rich Man, otherwise unidentified, is described as being one of the 1%. As happens to many of us who are wealthy we believe we are entitled to our position in life. We may have pity on those who don't have as much and we may envy those who have more, but we feel that we are at least entitled to what we have. The Rich Man is described as having more than most rich men and he enjoys unusually fine clothing and

² Pun intended.

³ The most recent Christian Century has a relevant article that I commend. Isaac S. Villegas, "A Liturgy in the Borderlands", Christian Century (October 2022) 42-46. Let me know if you'd like a copy of the article.

⁴ Matthew 25:31-46

rich food. He accepts this as his condition in life. He is, if he thinks about it, and probably doesn't, entitled.

The poor man has been placed in his doorstep with the hope that the Rich Man will be generous to him. The text says nothing about the poor man except that his name is Lazarus.

We have no idea whether or not either man was devout, prayed, and went to Temple or Synagogue. We just know that one is wealthy beyond all imagining while the other is so poor he would find the scraps left for the dogs to be sufficient. A first century Jew would've recognized that the behavior of the Rich Man is immoral and that Lazarus, regardless of who he is and what he did or didn't do to be lying in the doorway, as deserving. This is not a parable about the evil of wealth and the worthiness of the worthy poor. It is a parable about our need to give of who we are and what we have regardless of the reason those who need it are in need. In the parable there are only worthy poor, or to use an earlier reference, only worthy refugees. Their condition makes them worthy. The immigrants are at our borders. The Christian response, at least as I read this parable, is to offer them, regardless of their reason for coming to the border, aid.

They both die. Lazarus ends up in the Bosom of Abraham, at the heavenly banquet while the Rich Man ends up in Hades in perpetual torment. Whether or not this is an exhaustive statement on how our behavior in this life determines our eternal life it clearly says, you see I'm hedging because I'm uncomfortable, that our actions have consequences.

The Rich Man asks for an emissary from the dead, Lazarus, to go to his brothers because they will respect the uniqueness of a risen dead man, and Abraham refuses. While as Christians we certainly see in this a reference to the denial of Jesus as the Christ it is unlikely in the extreme that Jesus meant it that way. In other words I don't see it as a prediction of the Passion but instead as the simple fact of life. Given what the Torah says and how the Rich Man has ignored its commandments to treat the poor with sharing the wealth, it is unlikely that a risen Lazarus would've made an impact.

Of course as Christians living in a cultural Christian nation we know that the Resurrected Lord has had a vanishingly small impact on the way we as a people treat the poor and refugees. We as a people are willing to give to the worthy poor and perhaps Ukrainian Christians who become refugees, but not to the unworthy poor who really, our culture tells us, can only blame themselves for their condition. For instance those fleeing a hopeless life in South America. Lazarus has not led, as far as we know, an exemplary life of holy poverty. He's simply poor and dependent and therefore ends up in the Bosom of Abraham. The only hope the Rich Man had was to recognize his obligation to the poor, in this case Lazarus, and failing that he suffers the consequences. I don't and won't water down the starkness of this conclusion and it troubles me greatly. If we are to be faithful then we must as the Gospels say repeatedly, express that faith by our tangible, not just spiritual, love for the poor. Not the poor in spirit, not the poor seeking to better themselves, but the poor. This is a hard gospel but at least this Sunday the Gospel clearly tells us that our salvation depends upon following it and treating the poor as Abraham did. Not an easy Gospel. No wiggle room. Brown people at our borders are not pawns in a political game but instead people in need and compassion is the only Christian response to this need.

This is a challenging Gospel but the Gospel nevertheless. We can do this. Other weeks other discussions but this is always in the background. Our treatment of the poor

today is crucial to our being Christian. I would like to say that it enhances our Christianity but this text says that it defines it. This is not the only word on the subject but it is a constant theme.