

Lazarus and Dives

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost (OS 26C)

Published in the Ministry District of Yorke Peninsula

Sunday, September 25, 2022

This parable is a story about a very rich man who lived in what today we might call a gated community and about the very poor man, named Lazarus, who hung out around that gate every day hoping for scraps from that rich man's table. Lazarus was not only hungry; he was covered with sores and too weak to shoo away the dogs that came to lick them. Not surprisingly, Lazarus dies and he is taken by the angels to wherever it is that Abraham resides in the afterlife. Then the rich man dies and goes to a place of torment where he can see Lazarus. The rich man doesn't yet understand that things are different after death. He thinks that he still has the status to boss Lazarus around. He tells Abraham to send Lazarus to him with cool water to relieve his agony. But alas, just as there was in life, in death, there is a gap between the two of them, which prevents Lazarus from doing his bidding, even if he wanted to. And then the rich man and Abraham have a conversation about how to warn his brothers, still alive on earth, so they will escape this torment, but Abraham says that they have the Bible, they have all the warning they need if they will just listen.

You may know jokes or stories that begin with someone arriving at the pearly gates and having a conversation with St. Peter. We recognize those stories for what they are and don't expect them to reveal anything new about heaven. We should think of this parable like that. Jesus is probably using the folk lore of his time for the setting of this parable.

There is a gap between earthly life and the afterlife. It is one of several gaps we see in this parable. There is also a gap between the rich man and the poor man; one barely survived from day to day and lived in misery; the other ate gourmet food and wore imported clothes. Did you know that in the Roman Empire there were rules about who could wear purple and there were limits on how much anyone could wear? That tells us that this rich guy is really up there in terms of his wealth and status.

There is a huge gap between the rich man and Lazarus. We know nothing about these two men, other than their relative wealth. Perhaps the rich man is a church goer, who tithes and keeps the commandments. Perhaps he is a crook. Maybe Lazarus is a drug addict who stole from others to support his habit. Or maybe he is a retired pastor. We don't know. That doesn't seem important to Jesus, and he doesn't include those details. So we can't make assumptions about their relationship with God or their faith.

All we know is that in the next life, their positions are reversed. Lazarus is in comfort while the rich man is in agony. We might be tempted to let the rich man off the hook. Maybe he stayed inside that wonderful house. Maybe he never went past the gate and didn't even know Lazarus was out there. He probably had servants who take his trash to the curb. Maybe it's not his fault that Lazarus was starving right outside his door. Except that in the afterlife, he knows Lazarus by name. And he still thinks he can boss him around.

So what are we to do with this parable? Does it mean that we go to heaven if we give money or food to poor people? What if we are the poor people? Do we automatically go to

heaven? And what about the idea that God's love is unconditional, and that grace is a gift, freely given by God, not earned by us. How does that fit in with this parable?

I think this parable may speak to us best if we figure out where we stand in this story. Some of us might feel like Lazarus, always waiting at the gate while someone else gets the best stuff. If we feel like that, it might be useful to know that this character, Lazarus, is the only character in any of Jesus' parables with a name. In Jesus' day and in ours, poor people are often not known by name. They might be known as "the guy on the thruway with the sign that says "homeless please help" or "the woman at the bus stop who talks to herself." Or they're identified by the number assigned to them at the DSS office. But this very poor man in Jesus' parable is the only one with a name and his name means "God helps".

We might actually be like the rich man, but that's usually hard for us to admit to ourselves. Most of us in this room are not rich by the standards of our culture. We're part of the 99%, not the 1% in Occupy terms. And so we don't identify with the man who eats gourmet food and wears imported clothes. We're not rich.

Or are we? This week I found a fascinating website. Those of you with internet access can do this for yourselves. The site is www.globalrichlist.com. At that site, I learned that my annual salary and benefits put me in the top 1% of incomes in the world. And in the time it takes me to earn about \$43, the average labourer in Ghana makes 8 cents. To make what I earn in a year, the average person in Indonesia would have to work 110 years.

Now before you decide that you are paying me entirely too much, let me tell what else I learned. A person living in Australia at the poverty threshold with an annual income of \$18,600 is in the top 14% of people in the world by income. It would take the average labourer in Indonesia 15 years to earn that same amount of money.

My point is that whether we like it or not, simply because of where we were born, we have enough of the earth's resources to live very well. There is a gap between us and the world's poor. We are more like the rich man in this parable than we may think.

Where do we stand in this story? Do we identify with Lazarus or the rich man?

If you don't like either one of those choices, there is one more option. That's the people that Jesus tells this story to. Earlier in this chapter and in the preceding chapter, there have been references to Pharisees in the crowd. They are presented as Jesus' opponents, but for people who don't claim to agree with him or like him, they seem to spend a lot of time listening to him.

The Pharisees get a bad rap among Christians, and I think much of it is undeserved. I think they were trying very hard to get it right. They were the religious liberals of their day. They wanted to please God and believed that every person in Israel was capable of keeping the covenant, if only they would listen to their leaders. So they were on a mission to understand the Law themselves and to educate others. And perhaps some of them thought that Jesus might have important insights on that subject.

Just before this parable, Luke calls them "lovers of money". So this parable is told as a warning, to rich religious people. The warning is to mind the gap, to pay attention to what money does in your life. Does it isolate you? Does it build a chasm between you and your neighbor? Does it come between you and God?

Three possibilities -- Do we identify with wretched poor Lazarus, or the outlandishly rich man or the Pharisees? I don't know where you find yourself in this story, but me? I'm a

rich person, affluent compared to the rest of the world. And I'm a religious liberal who wants to get it right, wants to please God.

If you, like me, stand with the rich man or the Pharisees, or both, what might this parable mean for us?

There are a lot of emotions tied to being rich or poor. We can feel ashamed if we don't have enough and also ashamed if we have too much. There is nothing intrinsically spiritual about being cold, sick, hungry, sleep-deprived because there is no safe place to sleep, or dirty because there is no place to wash. There is nothing intrinsically unspiritual about having enough money to pay the bills and also enjoy some extras.

The rich man's fault is not that he was rich, but that he was indifferent to the needs of his neighbour. This is Jesus' warning: Mind the gap between you and your neighbour. Mind the gap that your wealth, your resources and your way of life can create. Mind the gap between what you profess to believe and how you act.

The truth of this parable seems to be that money is not bad in itself. It becomes bad when we let it and what it can buy, blind us to the gap between how things are and how God intends them to be. And it can do that so very easily. In Jesus' day, it was commonly believed that blessings in this life were a sign of God's favour, while illness, poverty and hardship were a sign of God's displeasure. If you were rich, God loved you. If you were poor, you had done something to deserve God's punishment. There are some Christian preachers who teach that still today. And there are some of us, who might subconsciously fall into that space without even realizing it. Jesus warns us, "Mind the gap."

My relative wealth privileges me. I have running water delivered to my house in hot and cold varieties. We don't share the experience of women around the world who haul bacteria-laden water in gallon buckets from distant streams or those who carry firewood on their heads to heat water for cooking. There is no routine gunfire in my neighbourhood, neither because of gang fights, nor because of warlords. I feel safe in my own home

I am blessed and I know it. I try to experience more gratitude than guilt for my situation, but at the same time I know that there is a gap between how things are and how God intends they should be. And because I am one who has been given much, much should be expected of me.

You know, I left out one other possibility. I left out the rich man's brothers, the ones who are still alive on earth and could hear Scripture and repent. Reading this story, we could stand with them. Then the question is whether we will read Scripture and change our ways, whether we will attend to Jesus' warning or not.

May God use these difficult words to give us a heart for the lost and the lonely, the poor and the rich who are our neighbours.

AMEN.