

Lazarus and the Rich Man

Sermon—Faith Mennonite Church

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Intro

Over the past few years when I've come across this parable in Luke 16, though seemingly simple, I've come to know it as incredibly complex:

- Vulnerable to a broad range of interpretations
- Deals with matters of life & death, heaven & hell
- And if I had a million dollars for every time I've heard someone tell me it's their favorite parable - I'd be broke.

Even after a step back, we have to acknowledge that we are never explicitly told that the rich man did anything wrong to deserve his fate - nor for the matter that Lazarus did anything right. But there is this odd switching of their roles.

But this story that Jesus tells his followers and Pharisees who were listening and ridiculing him, has some incredible details that often get overshadowed by images of Lazarus in Heaven, the Rich Man in Hell, and for some unknown reason, a creepy-looking outstretched hand with water dripping off the finger... at least, that's the image I can't get out of my head.

So for the next few minutes, I'd like to offer a few reflections on the parable from my reading over the past week, and at least for the moment, I'd invite you to try and shed any of your own projected images of this story that might overshadow them.

It's not just about economics

As I mentioned before, so often this Parable is broadly stroked as economical: we root for the poor, celebrating in the reward for Lazarus after a lifetime of suffering. And likewise we judge the extreme wealth of the Rich Man - so much, that we can't even identify with him - or maybe we don't let ourselves identify with him?

The dangers of wealth are clear, and this parable helps to illustrate that. But never does the Bible say a person with wealth *cannot* enter the Kingdom of Heaven. We know nothing more of this man other than his wealth, but it cannot warrant this punishment.

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This parable makes it far too easy to condemn wealth, and to forget, or even envy Lazarus' poverty - for he is eternally rewarded. Some have likened Lazarus' story to that of Job's - we don't know why he's in his position but he fully receives the reader's pity. But these assumptions are just as dangerous as judging the Rich Man for his wealth!

So Lazarus in his poverty didn't explicitly earn his place in heaven, and the Rich Man most certainly lost it. But if we can't earn our place in Heaven, and yet we can lose it - how does it all work? I don't know. But it's important to take note.

Lazarus' Name is Known

Most unique in this particular parable is that Lazarus' name is known. In all of the parables and stories that the Great Teacher told, Jesus never names a character. We can't take this lightly...

Lazarus - meaning "God is my help," may not be as significant as the simple fact that he is named. Not only does the Rich Man know of the man at his gates, he knows him well enough to call for him by name. This adds to the sympathy we feel for his character - we long for his salvation in the story.

I think it's clear to everyone here that we don't need divine intervention to realize that the poor, the broken, and the lonely are among us - we don't even need the threat of hell as this parable might suggest...

If we cannot see the poor person at our gates, we are lost.

Power & Privilege

Earlier this week, my dad and I had a conversation about this parable, and it centered almost exclusively on Power and Privilege.

In light of current events and social movements, it would be irresponsible to read any story without looking to see what Christ has to say to those with Power and Privilege. The scary part, is that at the end of this story, the privileged in life ends up in Hell - which fuels the fire so to say, in my search to find a way to avoid the same fate.

This is an uncomfortable subject for me to talk about. I feel unequipped, and in wrestling with trying to identify my own Power and Privilege, I'm always afraid when I find myself relating more closely to the Rich Man in this story.

In Rob Bell's book, Love Wins, he makes the point that the Rich Man, though enduring endless torture, still has not learned his lesson. He doesn't get it! He still sees Lazarus

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as a servant who is there to make his life more comfortable and to spare the suffering of his surviving family members. The Rich Man, in life and death, continues to view Lazarus in the light of his own, personal needs and sense of privilege.

The danger with how the Rich Man is described in this story, is that we won't relate to him. This is not a question of what this parable says about Donald Trump - which most of us white, middle class, social justice oriented, people of privilege would like to think. It's a parable about us, and a lesson in what we do with our own privilege.

How do we stand with, not up for, the Lazarus' of this world? Because when we stand up *for* them, we are communicating that we are better and stronger than them. How do we cross that great gulf? How do we work at reducing the size of that gulf?

Closing

What is the covenant that we have with one another, through Christ?

Who is here among us? Who is not at the table? Are they at our gates? And have they been invited?

As we share together in the symbol of the eucharist - how can we begin to recognize our privilege, and through the eyes of Christ, change our perspective? How can we see others in the light of their needs and lack of privilege rather than our own?