

September 25, 2016

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Luke 16:19-31

Rocka My Soul

I spent my middle and high school years in a small town in Minnesota. I lived, together with my five siblings, in a big old house that my mom fixed up. The house next door was pretty run down: chipping paint, an overgrown yard, rusted cars parked permanently in the driveway. The house just across the street from that one had an impressive turret and a carefully coordinated paint scheme and a manicured lawn.

After college, also in Minnesota, I moved to New York City, right into the heart of Manhattan. What an eye opening experience that was. I saw that the economic scale I knew growing up, what I had thought of as rich, was nothing, comparably. There was a whole other level—levels—of wealth, of which I only got glimpses. There were also whole other levels of poverty. You could glimpse that, too: people living in cardboard boxes, and eating out of the trash. Sometimes you could see those two extremes right next to each other, homeless people sleeping at the gates of buildings containing billions.

Such is the picture Jesus paints in today's gospel parable. It's a parable that is found only in the gospel of Luke, this parable of the rich man and Lazarus. As I mention that name, Lazarus, a point of clarification may be in order, for a Lazarus is mentioned in other stories in another gospel, in the gospel of John. That Lazarus, the one in John's gospel, is the brother of the sisters Martha and Mary. All of these siblings are good friends of Jesus, they all often share meals together; there are a couple stories about that in John. And in another story in John, that Lazarus gets sick and dies. And Jesus weeps. And then Jesus calls Lazarus out of the tomb. Lazarus still had more living to do.

But that's another Lazarus, that's the Lazarus in John's gospel. As far as we know, the Lazarus we hear about today is no relation. How could he be? The Lazarus in Luke wasn't a person, he's a character; he's in a parable, a made-up story, an imaginative way of teaching that Jesus was known to employ.

Still, it's interesting to note that in all of the parables that Jesus tells, it's only in this one, it's only this character, who is given a name, specifically, individually, particularly. In Jesus' other parables you'll hear about "a sower," or "a man who had two sons," or "a woman having ten silver coins." So also in this today's parable you have "a rich man," but then you also have this other character, "a poor man, named Lazarus." Now I don't know if the character of Lazarus had anything in common with the brother of Mary and Martha, but it's interesting that he gets a name. Unlike the rich man, Lazarus is specifically named.

But the contrasts do not end with nomenclature. The rich man is dressed in fine attire; Lazarus is dressed with sores. The rich man feasts sumptuously, Lazarus longs for table droppings. The rich man, we infer, luxuriates indoors. Lazarus, we are told, lays at the gate—or, to be closer to the story's original language, Lazarus is dumped at the gate.

The contrasts come to a temporary halt as both Lazarus and the rich man die. As everyone dies. Death: the great equalizer. But then the contrasts resume. Lazarus, so wretched in life, is carried off by angels, carried off to be with Abraham. Now, technically, I suppose Abraham could count as another character named in a parable—except that Abraham here is really more of a collective identity. Abraham, the father of Israel; the patriarch of the Jewish

people, in the parable Abraham here is less a person, than an entity, another kind of existence. He represents the recipient of God's covenant, the reception of favor, the culmination of God's faithful promises. Lazarus is taken away to be with Abraham, or, as the original language of the text more particularly says, not once, but twice, Lazarus is in Abraham's bosom. You know that song, "Rock a my soul in the bosom of Abraham..."? that gospel song was inspired by this gospel parable. Now if Abraham was in the story as patriarch only in a strictly limited sense, technically, Abraham wouldn't have a bosom. Apparently that word made our translators nervous, or confused; but I think it's an important detail. In fact, that same word is also used—and also similarly replaced by many translations—in the prologue to John's gospel. John chapter 1 famously describes who Jesus is in relation to the Father. John 1 says that no one has ever seen God, but God's only Son, "who is close to the Father's heart," or, more literally, it says God the Son, who "is in the bosom of the Father." I had a New Testament professor in seminary, an old German Catholic priest, Dr. Klauck, who used to say, "Ya, ya, the Son is in the bosom of the Father." Lazarus is in that place of ultimate and eternal wholeness, and peace, fullness, completeness, love.

And the rich man? Here's another contrast. The rich man is in a place called Hades, a place of torment, agony, flames and thirst—and, oddly enough, a place from which one can peer into the bosom of Abraham. The parable tells us this, for after the rich man dies, he can see Lazarus—whom he didn't seem to see in life. And now it is the rich man who begs: begs for a drop of water, begs for a message for his five siblings. And the rich man gets nothing, and neither are his siblings warned, and that is how the story ends, praise to you O Christ. And we thought the New Testament had all the nice stories.

Now in the history of Biblical and theological interpretation, much ink has been spilled, using this story, to talk about heaven and hell, to construct a concept of purgatory, to describe the afterlife with an emphasis on terror. When you read today's gospel, you can see why, but I think that misses something fundamental about this parable, that it is a parable, it is a story, an imaginative tale. All we really know about the afterlife is speculation. All we know for sure, is that we all die.

This is a story, therefore, not about the afterlife, but about this life. That is why Jesus tells it: to open our eyes, to open our eyes to the life we live here, now. To open our eyes to the people at our gate, or in the house next door. If we but open our eyes we will see them: our neighbors, and more than that. Maybe that is why Jesus gave this character in this story a name. And what a name, Jesus gave this character a name that that happened to be the name of one of Jesus' friends. That's who the poor and the suffering are, if we could but see them—and when it is we who are them: the poor and suffering are Jesus' friends.

We bring nothing into this world, today's reading from Timothy says, and we will take nothing out of it, that we should be content with food and clothing—another challenging word from the New Testament: be content with food and clothing—and its even more challenging corollary: be discontent until everyone has food and clothing. Be aware, Timothy says, of the great temptations that money can exert, that it is can be the root of all kinds of evil, a source of piercing pain. Timothy says "take hold of the life that really is life."

In Jesus, we are receivers of God's covenant. In Jesus we are recipients of God's favor. In Jesus we have been called out the grave, because we still have more living to do. Or as Stephen Grellet, a Quaker missionary said, "I expect to pass through this world but once; any good thing therefore that I can do, or any kindness that I can show to any fellow creature, let me do it now; let me not defer or neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again."