

## I Wish He Hadn't Told This Story

Proper 21, Year C - Luke 16:19-31

*preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, September 25, 2016*

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

I have to confess that I wish Jesus had never told the story in this morning's Gospel reading. I don't like the story in last week's Gospel either, but for a whole different reason. Last week's story, the one that in Bibles that have such labels is usually called "The Parable of the Dishonest Manager," I don't understand very well, though that's not why I didn't use it. It's different this week, though, because the reason I wish Jesus had never told the story of "The Rich Man and Lazarus" is that I think I understand it all *too* well.

You see, I wish Jesus had never told this story because it leaves me wondering whether the setting isn't all too familiar. There are really only two characters here in this story: a rich man and a poor man and we don't know very much about either of them.

All we know about the first man in that he is well off. Sometimes in the telling of the story, you might hear the man's name as "Dives," but that's just "rich man" in Latin. The story tells us that he wore fine clothes, and feasted sumptuously every day, but Jesus doesn't even give him a *name*. Did he inherit his wealth? Was he a hard working, self-made man? Had he invested wisely? We just don't know. Because we know the end of the story, we tend to sneer a little bit when we talk about the rich man. But from the one sparse sentence we have from Jesus, the rich man *might* have been a real piece of work, or he might have been a faithful member of the community who gave generously to church and charity. The rich man might have been someone who everybody praised as a model citizen and a pillar of the community. The rich man *might* have been a lot like us.

And what about the poor man at the gate? We *do* know *his* name, Lazarus. As a matter of fact, in all the parables that Jesus told, this poor man right here is the *only* one to whom Jesus gives a name. But all we know about him is that he is poor and he is sick and and he is homeless. Was he lazy, an alcoholic, a school drop-out? Was he handicapped? Was he chronically ill? Was he just plain unlucky? Because we know the end of the story, we tend to *assume* all sorts of things about Lazarus. But from the one sparse sentence we have from Jesus, Lazarus *might* have been a faithful man living on the margins of the community, or he might have been a real piece of work. Lazarus might have been pitiful or he might have been disgraceful. Lazarus might have been just *like* so many of the people we see every day, but try not to notice.

These two men seem to have known each other, or rather, they knew *of* each other. Jesus said that Lazarus would have been glad to have the scraps from the rich man's table, but he was locked outside the gate. I recently head a story of a community in the California where the residents were upset by the migrant workers who came to pick through their garbage. They solved the problem by putting locks on the dumpsters.

I wish Jesus had never told this story because the setting and the characters seem a little too close sometimes to our *own* time, to our *own* community.

I also wish Jesus had never told this story because it leaves me wondering where *I* fit in the story. One day, Jesus' story continues, both Lazarus and the rich man die. I'm sure the rich man had a lavish funeral, crowds of people, a lengthy eulogy recounting all his accomplishments, a fine limestone sarcophogus. Lazarus' body was probably taken to the valley behind the city where they burned the garbage and added to that day's mass grave, or uncermoniously cremated. But in the type of twist which Jesus's stories often have, as we follow Lazarus and the rich man on into the afterlife, we see that their

conditions are drastically reversed. We find Lazarus in the company of Father Abraham amidst all the glory and splendor of heaven. And we find the formerly rich man in Hades, where his request for a sip of water is met with Father Abraham's reply, "During your lifetime, you had everything and Lazarus had nothing, but now he is comforted here and *you* suffer."

The only conclusion that we can draw is that God pitied the poor man, while there is no mercy for the man who feasted sumptuously while a poor beggar starved to death outside his gate. And the only defense that I can claim is that I'm not like that guy.

Then I remember the other day, when a woman called asking if she could get a little help. I braced myself for the usual short-of-breath story about why someone else should pay her rent or her utilities or her car payment. It turned out what she needed was \$3 in quarters so she could do her laundry.

I wish Jesus had never told this story because it reminds me that the beggar at *my* door is the family just down the street, the nation just across our border, the two thirds of the world's population who would consider my most modest comfort to be wealth beyond even their imagination.

And I wish Jesus had never told this story because it leaves me wondering if I have really *listened* to what God has to say to me. The story continues when we discover that the rich man is worried about his brothers. "Send Lazarus to warn my brothers to change their ways," he says, "so that they don't end up here!" But Abraham responds, "They already *have* their warning. They already have Moses and the prophets. They already have all the answers they need."

If Lazarus would have been sent to warn those brothers, the message that he would have given them is the same message that *we* have already heard over and over again. We have the same scripture that was available to this man's brothers – and *then* some. I hear the same messages from Isaiah that the rich man was supposed to hear. I hear the same laments from Jeremiah that his brothers were supposed to hear. And all too often, I pay it every bit as much heed as they did.

I wish Jesus had never told this story because it brings all that prophetic rhetoric home and puts it right there in my face.

But as Jesus's story comes to a close, all the sudden I'm not so sure that I wish Jesus had never told it. In final desperation, the formerly rich man implores Abraham to send Lazarus back from the dead to warn his brothers. Abraham refuses, but at the same time, the good news strikes home to me. You see, on this side of the parable, on this side of *rest* of the story, we do *indeed* have the witness and testimony of one who has risen from the dead! The message that comes from the witness of the gospel is that God does not judge us on our wealth or poverty. The message that comes from the witness of the gospel is that God does not judge us on our stinginess or generosity. The message that comes through loud and clear in the witness of the gospel is that we are saved when we put our faith and trust in Jesus Christ and all that he accomplished for us in his death and resurrection.

But look out! When we accept that message, our lives are transformed. When we have experienced the unconditional love and grace and forgiveness of God through Jesus Christ, we are no longer controlled by that old human nature of selfishness and self-serving greed. When we grasp that call on our hearts from the victory side of the grave, we are changed from the inside out by the love and grace of God and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

This side of the story, we live in *that* presence. This side of the story, we grow in *that* grace. This side of the story, we can, and we *must*, reach out to close whatever chasm we have built between us and our neighbor, not from hope of paradise, nor from fear of torment, but from the absolute love that loves us *still* from the cross and the empty grave. That is the final message of *the* story this morning.

And I suppose that... after all... I *am* glad that Jesus told *just* such a story!