

Sermon TUMC – September 25, 2016

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Luke 16: 19-31

Psalm 146

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable unto you, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

All we have

Today we have another one of the parables that Jesus told while he was challenging the privileged religious leaders of his day, aka as the Pharisees,

Once upon a time, there was a nameless rich guy covered in purple fabric (read expensive) and another named Lazarus, covered in purple sores (read gross).

The rich man belonged (it was his house) and Lazarus was literally an outsider. We are told that he was laid at the rich man's gates, but we don't know who brought him there and left him.

The rich man feasted, Lazarus craved some crumbs. Happy, miserable.

It would seem they didn't interact a whole lot, and yet the rich man knew Lazarus' name.

Then, their fates come together for a moment in that they both pass on, move on, die.

And then the story changes, things get reversed, like an old photo negative.

Lazarus is carried off by angels and placed in (old fashioned terminology) "the bosom of Abraham." (picture yourself cuddling a baby, imagine being the baby, that's how Lazarus felt). For people who were suffering, it was the ultimate fantasy of eternal comfort. Is it any wonder that the Spirituals that were sung by suffering slaves in North America pick up on this image? (Rock a my soul in the bosom of Abraham). Now that there's a baby in my life I get it. Perhaps Abraham was enjoying it too. To be the baby, that's true comfort. It is still true that some people's misery is so miserable, that they have no hope in the present life.

So Lazarus is carried off to comfort, and the other dead man is buried, he goes to Hades, aka Hell. And he's very un-comfortable, in fact, he is being tormented, he is hot and he is thirsty. On top of it all, he can still see Lazarus, but this time not at his gate. The former poor man has accommodations that are far more comfortable than his.

Jesus, a charismatic storyteller, loved reversal, surprise endings, especially when he was teaching about the way God gets things done, about God's reign. Donald Kraybill famously called it "The Upside Down Kingdom," in a book that was seminal for my Anabaptist formation. But according to Jesus, it's the Right Side Up Kingdom, it's the way things should be.

One would imagine that the former rich man was humbled by his torment and discomfort, but old habits die hard. He sees Abraham far away, with Lazarus and he asks Abraham to send him down to bring some water. "The [former] rich man still imagines that he can send for Lazarus and he will have to come."¹

But Abraham sets him straight. There's a chasm, a huge gap between this man and Lazarus, and if the rich man didn't bother crossing it in life, no one is going to cross it anymore at this point. "You received your good things in your life," says Abraham, "Lazarus likewise the bad." It's different now.

So the man formerly known as rich has to resign himself to his own suffering. But he still can't quite get out of his privileged mindset. Could Abraham, then, please look out for his family? Send special word that would keep them from a similar fate as his?

And Abraham tells him, no sorry, there are no special privileges to be granted, only the usual Moses and the Prophets (aka the Law and the Prophets) – this is shorthand for all the teachings that the religious leaders had at their disposal.

In other words, Abraham tells Richie that his brothers already **have everything they need to know about how to live rightly** -- just as he did – and if they weren't willing to do it, well, let's just say he'd be seeing them soon. There would be no extra miracles sent their way that would satisfy them or change their minds anyway.² (You will recall that during Jesus's he was frustrated that people were always wanting to see "signs and wonders." He told them they already had what they needed, did they not get it?!)

Before you imagine that I'm going to be talking about fire and brimstone, I want to tell you that I don't think this story is about Heaven and Hell, and that it wasn't Jesus teaching about the afterlife.

He was just using their common assumptions about the after life to shake up his listeners, whom you will recall were the privileged religious leaders of his day. As

¹ Richard Swanson, *Provoking the Gospel of Luke*.

² The author of the gospel of Luke seems to add an extra dig – they won't even believe it if someone is resurrected – probably referring to his own context post Jesus' resurrection.

with all of Jesus' parables, he took something familiar and then twisted it, it was an invitation for them to see the world differently, to live more fully into God's way.

The parallel that comes to mind is Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* where Scrooge is visited by ghosts to get him to see his life differently; the ghost of the past, of the present and of the future. He was using a scary story to make a point. A "this is your life" review to get them to change their minds. I think that's what Jesus was doing here too.

As privileged religious people of *our* day, in this time and place, what invitation do we find in this parable for us?

If we were visited by ghosts, what would they be pointing out to us?

What reversals are we being asked to be a part of?

Years ago I read a book criticizing how preachers tend to "spiritualize" Jesus' parables and see only the metaphorical applications while missing the more obvious points. The author would play out an elaborate metaphorical explanation about the parable of the Good Samaritan (i.e. the beaten up stands for the difficulties we all face in life and so on). The punch line was to wonder who the donkey stood for in that parable. Well, the donkey, he'd say, is the preacher who is missing the whole point of the parable!

Lest I become the donkey, I will not move too quickly to the more obscure inferences I see from this parable for our specific context here at TUMC. I'll start by naming that, whatever else this story might be about, it is obviously about wealth and poverty and justice. It's about God's call to restore balance in the world; a call to us.

It's about how our lives are intrinsically caught up in one another. It is about our blindness to social inequality and the ways in which we the wealthy and privileged can miss what is right in front of us, the needs of the impoverished at our gates.

Yes, I did change the pronouns to we, us and our. We are the wealthy.

Yesterday I went to a website called <http://www.globalrichlist.com/>, and I plugged in my so-called net worth and found out that I am among the richest people on the globe because I have equity in my house and retirement savings (130,281,947th). Even someone on welfare in Ontario is still among the top 14% wealthiest on the globe. And that's not counting social services and health care, only income.

Sobering. Eye opening. I see a chasm. I started to ask myself who is at our gate that we are not seeing?

Then I realized – I kid you not, you cannot make this up -- that I had missed an email from earlier this week from someone asking us for help to buy food for their family. I was so busy with other things going on at our church that I had overlooked that simple request! (I promise you, I did not make this up as a sermon illustration, it really happened.) Fortunately, I had time to rectify that for the time being and help was found.

It doesn't fully answer the question for us as a congregation, but it sure helped me to rearrange some priorities in my own heart and mind (and sermon). Who is at our gate that we are not seeing? That is what we need to keep asking ourselves if we want to be a valid church.

In this story, there is no doubt that Jesus was giving his listeners a hard time for not seeing and helping those in need. We find it in other places where he talks about helping "the least of these." (Matthew 25:20).

He assumed that his listeners would know better than the rich man, because they had the Law and the Prophets which emphasized the mandate for justice and care for the marginalized.

What did Jesus mean when he said "the Law and the Prophets?" Well, to his first century Jewish listeners he was referring to the Torah (first 5 books of our Bible) and the prophetic writings and their interpretations that were the basis of his listeners' religious practice.

Elsewhere in the gospels when Jesus was asked to sum the Law and the Prophets, here's how he put it: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." And "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." (Matthew 22:36-40).

Well, that is the face-value reading of Jesus' parable; a clear call to see, name and care for the marginalized, especially the economically marginalized.

Now, hold on to this for a moment while I come at the parable from an entirely different angle.

As I prayed for our church this week, asking for wisdom in the midst of our listening circles and conversations and email exchanges and meetings and personal struggles trying to get our hearts and minds around the fact that our beloved pastor has told us that she is gay and that her marriage has ended, I was intrigued by the response that Abraham gives the despairing rich man who was worried about his family. Abraham basically told him: They already have everything that they need to figure things out.

In the parable the rich man is remembering his life and wishing he had done things differently. From his vantage point of being haunted by *his* past, he was asking for

some kind of miraculous intervention that would save his family from his same fate, that would help them see clearly what they were not seeing back there in the real world.

That was Jesus' invitation to the Pharisees in this parable, to review their lives in light of God's teachings. To cross the gap while there is still time. This is our call too.

Some of us are looking on this time in our church as a repeat of something else, past experiences of hurt in marriage or in church, ongoing experiences of discrimination, deep concerns about loss of values. We're bringing that past, whether we realize it or not.

Memory is not a bad thing, but we must not use it for fear but rather to take the broad view of our situation. Jesus in fact promised that the Holy Spirit would remind us of all things (John 14:26). As one author put it, "No [one] can be saved until [they] remember. For memory, by its power to restore experiences, to select from experience the saving items, and to use that experience for a nobler way of life, is a door of hope."³ Memory as a door of hope.

The Spirit is at work in our remembering, in our questions about where is God in all this, in our crossing any gaps to listen to the other. We have what we need.

To conclude I have another story for you:

"There was once an impoverished man by the name of Reb Isaac ben Yakil of Krakow. He lived in poverty for many years, not knowing where his next crust of bread would come from. Still, Reb Isaac had implicit faith that G-d would not let him starve, and that one day his suffering would end.

One night, he dreamed that there was highly valuable buried treasure under a specific bridge in Prague. At first, he paid the dream no attention, assuming it was mere wishful thinking. After all, who doesn't dream of riches? But when the dream repeated itself night after night after night, he began to reconsider. Perhaps there was something to it? Could it possibly be true?

So, he set off to Prague—a long and tiring journey, only to discover that the bridge was right near the royal palace and thus heavily guarded at all hours. Soldiers marched up and down, alert and ready, looking for any signs of danger or unusual activity. Digging under the bridge was clearly out of the question. Oh, how disappointing.

But Reb Isaac was not going to give up that easily. He returned to the bridge day after day until the guards began to recognize him. Soon they became curious. "Why

³ Interpreter's Bible (1952 edition)

do you come to the bridge every day?" one of the guards asked him. "Are you waiting for someone?"

Reb Isaac knew they wouldn't believe some half-hearted excuse, so he told them about his dream. The guard listened, threw back his head, and laughed heartily. "You came all this way because of a silly dream? You fool! I had a dream that a certain, Reb Isaac Ben Yakil, has buried treasure under his stove, but do you see me going on a wild good chase? Of course not!" and he laughed uproariously.

Meanwhile, Reb Isaac hurried off to buy a ticket for the first train back to Krakow. Now he knew where to look! Sure enough, when he arrived he immediately shoved the iron stove out of the way and began digging at the hard dirt floor. And, to his great joy and astonishment, after some effort he uncovered a chest of gold coins!

He used the money to build a magnificent synagogue which bore his name, and with the rest of the money he built himself a comfortable home and furnished it well."

[Moral of the story...]You don't always find what you're looking for by travelling to a distant [place]. True spiritual treasure can be acquired right near home...⁴

So what do we have? What is our treasure right under our eyes at this opportunity?

We do have our material resources, we have a new welcoming lobby, we have a ministry to people who have suffered from imprisonment, we have each other.

Last week Gary's excellent sermon reminded us that as people who have placed our lives in the way of Christ's transforming power, we are helped to see the world differently, through God's eyes.

He reminded us that as the church, we are called to work for reconciliation – in all realms. "The mark of community – true biblical unity – is not the absence of conflict. It's the presence of a reconciling spirit." (Bill Hybels).

Let us remember what we are here for. Remember to see the world and each other through God's eyes.

As we take stock, and seek wisdom let us also not lose sight of the marginalized at our gates, waiting for balance to be restored.

Let us remember to trust God in all this, with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind, and to love our neighbours as ourselves.

⁴ http://www.chabad.org/blogs/blog_cdo/aid/2166670/jewish/The-Story-of-Isaac-Ben-Yakil.htm