

Sharing Everything

Menno Mennonite Church
September 25, 2022

Purpose: To expand our engagement with the hard parables of Jesus to speak to our full experience of life.

Message: Hearing the parable of Lazarus and the Rich man, we are invited to hear deeply the invitation Jesus is making to the life of the Kingdom.

Scripture: Luke 16:19-31; Psalm 148 (complementary text).

Synopsis: There are some texts that you just avoid. This is one of them. It demands uncomfortable things of us and for us. The direct reading is important but to make it a missive about wealth and the ills there of is incomplete. Jesus is inviting us to do what parables do—to have a picture of the world changed painted for us. There is the wealth of the witness of the prophets and the Law; wealth often hoarded and not headed that we are also invited to share and be pulled by in hearing the whole of the parable being told.

*The name Lazarus has its roots in the Hebrew name Eleazar, which translates to “**God will help.**” Lazarus is the Greek version of the name that appeared in The New Testament.*

Luke 16:19-31

¹⁹ “There was a rich man
who was dressed in purple and fine linen
and who feasted sumptuously every day.

²⁰ And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus,
covered with sores,

²¹ who longed to satisfy his hunger
with what fell from the rich man’s table;

even the dogs would come and lick his sores.

²² The poor man died
and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham.

The rich man also died and was buried.

²³ In Hades, where he was being tormented,
he looked up and saw Abraham far away
with Lazarus by his side.

²⁴ He called out,
‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me,
and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water
and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’

²⁵ But Abraham said,
‘Child, remember that during your lifetime
you received your good things,
and Lazarus in like manner evil things;
but now he is comforted here,
and you are in agony.’

²⁶ Besides all this,
between you and us a great chasm has been fixed,
so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so,
and no one can cross from there to us.

’ ²⁷ He said,
‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house—
²⁸ for I have five brothers—
that he may warn them,
so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’

²⁹ Abraham replied, ‘
They have Moses and the prophets;
they should listen to them.’

³⁰ He said, ‘No, father Abraham;
but if someone goes to them from the dead,
they will repent.’

³¹ He said to him,
‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets,
neither will they be convinced
even if someone rises from the dead.’ ”

As I have mentioned before, if after almost 15 years of broadly preaching the lectionary, and you don't find a selection having been explored, then it is probably high time to stop dancing and engage the text. To be sure there is plenty of reading left unexplored. But a parable of Jesus told at the core of his teaching really ought not be ignored. As Emily developed well last week, it is these sticky, hard to parse sayings that can yield surprising nuggets of truth and moments of hope. It only seems fitting to continue what was started in considering what these words might mean for us, for our faith, and in our hope. The fact that it is one that we don't commonly turn to or keep on our top 10 lists of texts that define our faith and hold close to our hearts when we are looking for comfort and reassurance. So what do we do with these words of challenge and separation when we would so readily leave them behind?

The first thing that we have to do is speak to the issue of this being a happenstance dealing with the rich and speaking with against wealth. When we read these words, we all have our version of Lazarus appear before our eyes, and it is likely someone we pass on our way in our out of the grocery store, on the street corner and so many other places. We cannot ignore the fact that these words convict and confound us as we speak again the qualifications and complications we place upon our care, honest as they are. We cannot pass by the responsibilities that the poor have to the less fortunate neither here or elsewhere. It is what the gospels speak to at far greater length than anything else. Yet even so it is not a simple formulaic equation as we might assume—rich bad poor good. Always within the economics of Jesus there exists the care of God and the working of faith within the context of stewardship. Many commentators take great pain to split this into pieces and suggest that this was an addition to the text sometime later. Maybe so, but that misses the point. Money is not, ultimately the question, points out NT Wright in his work *Luke for Everyone*, It is the question of faithfulness in the light of all the given gifts. Money happens to be the most relevant and demanding of these gifts, asking for great care and due consideration. We are asked to be faithful with and through the lens of money, relying on God in faith for that which we have and being spurred by that faith.

That is what we hold here reading of Lazarus and the rich man as a story—a morality tale with a point to be written and remembered. The trouble is, that is not what it is, or at least, that is not ALL that it is. Remember that Jesus is said to be always speaking in parables, connecting a story not only to the meaning on the face of it but also on something bigger still. The Parable of the rich man and Lazarus involves wealth, yes, but something far more comprehensive as well.

A parable by its very nature reaches well beyond the basics of the story and offers something beyond the direct meaning at hand, but also speaks to the broader context. The story doesn't convey something fairly common—the folk belief that the fortunes of this life are reversed in the next—a fairly common contention in many ways of framing the universe. The Parable paints a picture of the way of God beyond the here and now, illustrating the life and work of the kingdom.

Some of the evidence of this falls in the story parts that we leave out in telling the stories here. We already know that the Pharisees and Jesus are playing their cat-and-mouse evaluation of each other. The previous story of the Steward was told to them and, according to Luke “they ridiculed him for it (16:14). Continuing, Jesus offers several expansions on the basic law of the Mosaic code, including speaking to the relationships of divorce and the way of judgement.

That is the canvas setup for this painting. And he paints it richly. The rich man is cast in the most opulent light. The descriptions of his clothes and his lifestyle that this is one of the rich and famous followed today by paparazzi and all the rest. Lazarus is well depicted to. The name Lazarus leaves little doubt meaning “God will help” rendered in the Greek. The conditions are miserable—as is well described. On the other side he is placed at the privileged place with Abraham—on Abraham's breast some translators would have it. There is no mention of whether the lack of care for Lazarus is intentional or mere neglect. No implication that there was anything between them but proximity. Yet in the after life the gulf between them exists not to be bridged even as compassion would demand it.

It is the ending that makes the point. This would be the concluding cord of the background music were this a film—the coup de grace of the whole running argument. Placed in the condition of being judged, he is left with the simple question regarding the right thing to do—Do they not know the law and the prophets? How then would resurrection solve the problem? Would they like ancient Ebenezer Scrouges reform their way is they are shown the long error of their ways? Or just dismiss it as one more bad dream.

The point that is being driven home here is that the Pharisees have been given riches—riches of class and privilege, yes, and we assume the resources to go with it. But those are not the only riches that they have been given nor those with whose keeping they are charged. They have been also given the law to share and to live in actual fact, changing the here and now to the sweet by and by. The pharisees are being invited, along with anyone else who live fully in the

law to do what that law asks of them. Jesus is inviting the pharisees to live out the great commandments that they know by heart not with the basic requirements of ritual purity in mind—eating exactly enough of your broccoli to earn your just deserts—but with the outcome and will of God with us already active and activating to the demands of the day. Luke makes Jesus' mission in this world clear throughout the text: he has come to implement the way of the Lord in the here and now. He pursues this time and again, and is continuously inviting others to do so as well building a kingdom not by overthrowing the law and doing away with the implication of judgement, but rather re-framing the law into the work of the lifetime and a life style that invites genuine change on the heart level from revering to doing. That is the repentance that is invited. That is the way forward for those who would hear the word of the Lord. This is not a change that can be affected by the radical witnessing of the world's reality in a supernatural way—the raising of the dead to underscore the lesson of the day. It is something that has to be lived to be known, and in living a full contrast is made.

Jesus is criticized for receiving the poor and the outcast, for stepping outside what is polite and acceptable. He then uses those unacceptable across multiple parables to reflect the image of those who would reject them in the first place, and the portrait is not a flattering one. But it is always one that invites us to share everything—the grace that we have been given, the law that speaks to the world as it should be and people at their best, and yes, also invites us to share of what we have been given. It is the sketch of God's kingdom, God's hope, God's way. It is hard not to think of the concluding statement of this reading holding that not even a resurrection would change the mind of the committed as not-too-subtle foreshadowing of his own ministry. Yet all the same, change has come and the world will, in all things change and move.

May we always wonder at the working of Christ with us, and hear him always inviting us to the new world of grace and hope, where we share all of our riches—even the very spirit of the law—that we are given to treasure. Amen.