

Beyond Persuading

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Olentangy Christian Reformed Church
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Luke 16:19-31

Jesus is on the road to Jerusalem. Among other things, he has been telling stories, including this one.

Once there was a rich person. He dressed himself in purple and in fine linen. Every day was a lavish celebration. Once a poor person, named Lazarus, was brought to his gate. He was covered with sores. He wanted to eat what fell off the rich person's table. But – oh! – dogs came and licked his sores.

Now the poor person died. And he was carried away by angels to Abraham's side. The rich person died, too. And he was buried. In Hades, in his torment, he lifted up his eyes, and, in the distance, he saw Abraham and, at his side, Lazarus.

And he called out, "Father Abraham, pity me. Send Lazarus to dip his fingertip in water and cool my tongue. I'm suffering in this fire." But Abraham said, "Remember, child, in your life you received good things for yourself. In the same way Lazarus [received] bad things. Now he is comforted here, while you are suffering. Besides all this, a deep gorge separates us from you. Those who want to cannot pass over from here to you. And [people] cannot cross over from there to us."

And he said, "Father, I ask you, then, to send him to my father's house, because I have five brothers, to bear witness to them, so that they won't come to this place of torment, also." But Abraham said, "They have Moses and the prophets. Let them listen to them!"

And he said, "No, father Abraham! If only someone comes to them from the dead, then they will repent." But he said to him, "If they don't listen to Moses and the prophets, then they won't be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead."

Sermon

I used to say that the problem with Jesus is that he hasn't read Paul. Actually, it would be more accurate to say that Jesus hasn't read Luther's *spin* on Paul. Through Martin Luther and his theological heirs, we have learned:

- ▶ that salvation is a gift from God,
- ▶ that the gift is received by faith,
- ▶ that there is nothing we can do to earn that gift of salvation,
- ▶ and that by that gift we are free from judgment, free from condemnation.

That's how I learned it. The Heidelberg Catechism gave me comfort (Q&A 1). It assured me that my judge is already my savior (Q&A 52). All I need is faith. Whew!

But, again, the problem is that Jesus hasn't read Paul. Or that he hasn't read this spin on Paul, which presents only part of the whole picture. Today's story, like so many others Jesus tells, makes this clear: *God will judge us according to what we've done with what has been made known to us from God.* And the time to act on this bit of information is now!

We turn to the story.

First, the characters. "Once," Jesus says, "there was a rich person" (v. 19a). Now, I don't know about you, but I've known some rich people. Not filthy rich, but richer than any of us. You couldn't necessarily tell that they were rich. They drove ordinary cars. They ate ordinary food. They wore ordinary clothes. They lived in ordinary houses — for the most part. But the rich person in Jesus's story?

You could tell he was rich! He did not buy his clothes on sale at Kohls. Every piece of clothing he wore was custom-tailored. He did not pick up his groceries at the local Kroger. Each item on his table? It had been hand-picked from a specialty market. And not by his hands either. He paid people to do that sort of thing. The entrance to his estate? It was not a small wooden gate hanging from a white picket fence. The gate was heavy, wrought-iron. And it melded into a sandstone-block wall. The gate itself was motorized. And at its center, in bronze, very large, was the initial of his family name. Closed-circuit security cameras were mounted at both ends of the gate. Everything at the gate, everyone at the gate was visible inside the house. And inside that house? Every day was a celebration, a party that had no end. (It reminds me of my favorite line from *The Sound of Music*. Max Detweiler says, “I like rich people. I like the way they live. I like the way I live when I’m with them.”)

“Once,” Jesus says, “a poor person, named Lazarus, was brought to [the rich person’s] gate” (v. 20). If the rich person was filthy rich — and he was — then Lazarus was filthy poor. But not only was Lazarus dirt poor, he also was crippled. He couldn’t walk to the rich person’s gate. He was brought there. And he was diseased. His body was oozing with open sores. On top of that, Lazarus was hungry, hungry enough to sort through the sweepings collected in the rich person’s dust pan to look for a morsel that may have fallen from the table to the floor. And Lazarus had the sick smell of infection about him. The smell attracted keen-nosed dogs, who licked at his sores. For anyone who bothered to look — and to notice — Lazarus was a sight to behold. And not a pretty sight!

Here’s what happened: It was a great reversal, the kind that Mary sang about in her song, the *Magnificat*. Lazarus died. And instead of friends — or pitying strangers — carrying him to the rich man’s gate, this time angels carried him. They carried him to Abraham’s side, to paradise. Lazarus, whose only real friends had been puss-licking dogs, was now arm-in-arm with Abraham, the friend of God.

Oh, the rich man died, too. And the hired help carried his body to a hole in the ground. From there, the rich man slid down to Hades’ basement. Flames licked at his once-pampered flesh. His lips cracked open. And his tongue, dangling from the side of his mouth like a dog’s tongue, was scorched by the heat. He was in misery. And he cried out to “Father Abraham.” He wanted pity from Abraham. And he wanted servitude from Lazarus. “Father Abraham,” he pleaded, “send Lazarus to soothe my suffering.”

“Nothing doing!” Abraham said. “Your fate is sealed, as is the fate of Lazarus.” (The reversal has happened. As Mary sang, the poor person has been filled with good things, and the rich person has been sent away empty. The reversal has happened, and it won’t be undone.)

“Then, what about my five brothers?” the rich person pleads. “Send Lazarus to them . . .” (Always he sees Lazarus, if he sees him at all, as a servant.) “Send Lazarus to warn them, to save them from my fate!”

Again Abraham says, “Nothing doing!” He says, “They have Moses and the prophets. That’s enough! Even someone rising from the dead won’t convince them, if Moses hasn’t.” (In other words, God has already revealed enough to shape an obedient life. As the prophet Micah put it, “He has shown you what’s good; he has shown you what’s required. Do justice. Love mercy. Walk humbly with your God.” Enough has been said.)

So, what are some of the implications of this little story Jesus tells? First, as I said at the beginning, what we do in this life determines what we experience in the next. (This is in Paul, too, by the way.) Now, I don’t like that. Not at all. I want to believe in Jesus. I want to go about my life. And I want, in the end, to enter the kingdom. But when a rich person does that — when he counts himself a child of Abraham (which he is; Abraham called him “child”) and when he lives out his lavish lifestyle day after day, deaf to God’s voice of justice and mercy, blind to those God has placed within reach of his potential generosity — when a rich person does that, there is a heavy price to pay.

And his brothers, who are already stumbling down the same path? They'll get no special revelations. They'll get no visits from the dead. And we won't either. We already have enough. We've heard it; now to do it. We can't be expecting something new, we can't be expecting something more to take us to the next level — some private revelation (“Give me a vision, Lord. Speak to me!”), then we'll listen; some pulling back of the veil (“I'm just not sure. Make it clear to me, Lord!”), then we'll follow. No!

Many of you have Michigan connections. You know the state motto: *If you seek a pleasant peninsula, look around you*. I wonder if it should say, *If you seek a pleasant peninsula, look around you — stupid! You're standing right in the middle of one. Are you blind?* If you want to follow Jesus, if you want to trust and obey, then lift up your eyes and see what he's already shown you.

Jesus said the nations would be judged by how they cared for the poor, how they cared for the sick, how they cared for the imprisoned. We will be judged, no doubt, by the same standard.

For years now, I have been attending meetings of the BREAD Clergy Caucus. Time and time again, I have been encouraged to preach about justice, about the need to put things right socially, culturally, and economically, about the need to overturn structures that push people down and hold them down. Despite that encouragement, I admit that I often don't see the justice themes that others see in particular biblical texts. In today's story, for example, I see themes about God's revelation, about Jesus' resurrection, and about the persistent unbelief of the first century Jewish leaders (especially the rich and comfortable among them) in the face Jesus' resurrection. That's what I tend to see. That's how I was trained.

But justice themes are in many biblical texts, including today's story. Moses and the prophets called Israel to justice. The prophets especially warned the rich about the dangers of the blind eye. (Being rich in itself wasn't a problem; Abraham was rich, very rich.) The rich person in Jesus' story was blind. He saw Lazarus. He knew his name. But he was blind to his obligations to Lazarus, blind to the possibilities of how he might do justice in the case of Lazarus. The rich person was blind, and there was hell to pay for that. Lazarus, on the other hand . . . God and the angels had a special concern for him. Through his angels, God fulfilled the compassion for the poor of which the prophets spoke.

What's the justice theme in today's story? This: the rich and comfortable have some obligation to the poor and miserable.

Now, when we hear this story about the rich person and Lazarus, we may not be able to place ourselves in it. We're not rich, certainly not like the man in the story. We're not filthy rich, and our lifestyles are not so opulent. On the other hand, we're not poor like Lazarus, not even close. But there are those five brothers. There's an open question about them. (It seems it's always that way with brothers. In the story of the prodigal son, it's the older brother over whom a question mark lingers at the end.)

We don't hear about these five brothers being filthy rich. Nor do we hear about them as pillars of justice and mercy and obedience to God. What will become of them? What will become of us? We're not filthy rich, but we are comfortable enough to be under some obligation to the poor and miserable. It won't do for us to ignore that. We ignore it at our peril.

Suppose we do ignore it. Where, then, would be our gratitude for the gift of salvation? Suppose we do ignore it. Where, then, would be the evidence of our justification? Where, then, would be the evidence of our welcome into God's family through Jesus Christ, of our welcome to Abraham's side?

And it's not just Moses and the prophets who teach this to us. Jesus does, too — the savior who is our judge. And he came back from the dead. Surely we'll listen to him. Unless we're beyond persuading.