

Sermon for Trinity, Bend Proper 21, 2019

"[The nameless rich man] said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send [Lazarus] to my father's house— for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.' Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.' He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' 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.'"

Father Jed and Deacon Gaye talked about parables in the last two weeks, and well they should. The Gospel readings for these past weeks are all parables and will continue to be for some time to come. Jed noted that the definition of parables is notoriously difficult to pin down. Actually, if we're going to talk about parables then we ought to talk as a parable teaches—a parable is LIKE this, or LIKE that; just as the Lord speaks in his parable, a grace filled life can be compared to, or is like, a woman who has lost a silver coin and abandoning all else, searches until she finds it. So, let me say that this morning's parable is very much LIKE a story you all know well, *The Christmas Carol*, by Charles Dickens.

As soon as you recollect the Christmas Carol, Tiny Tim, Bob Cratchit and Scrooge, then you'll see where I am going. Of course, in this morning's Gospel, the rich man is not named Scrooge; in fact, just to underline how universal and common he is, the rich man is nameless, a sort of rich "everyman." But the rich man behaves like Scrooge, even worse, because the rich man of the Gospel story feasts in front of the poor, leaving Lazarus to be licked by the dogs. I should add here that the reference to dogs is not a friendly look at pets; the dog in the Middle East is spoken of with revulsion for it's a scavenger that consumes corpses. Lazarus gets no comfort at all, even from the dogs.

I won't belabor this comparison but let me make this point—neither the Christmas Carol nor the story of the rich man and Lazarus are meant to be understood as factual reports. And yet, like all great fiction, these stories offer more profound, truthful insights than facts alone can deliver. In both cases, the rich man and Scrooge see a glimpse of the future and the future is not pretty; both will suffer horribly if they continue as they have. And that picture of suffering is not meant to be a caution just for the rich man and Scrooge, both of whom are quite rich. Instead, these parables,

ancient and modern, are meant to be a caution, nay, a warning to us. If we live like these two do, we will be under judgment by God.

It's not difficult to take away a moral of the story from the rich man and Lazarus. We get it; on an individual level we are cautioned to be considerate, attentive, compassionate and generous. I've certainly been cajoled, reprimanded and threatened by people preaching this story over the decades. Truth is, this parable makes for a great stewardship Sunday sermon—we need to wake up, pay attention and be generous. We know from the last several Sunday's parables that God will never abandon us; even so, we must learn to care for others as Jesus taught—Love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. There is no greater law.

The point of law reveals something else in this Gospel story that often gets hidden behind the story of ghosts, and flames and Hades, all terrifying in their own right. There's a deeper caution, a universal warning, woven into this parable. It's a caution to the Pharisees of the time of Jesus and the "Pharisees" of our age. Let's ask, why did Lazarus have to suffer? Was it for the benefit of this story? To be an example? Hardly. Lazarus was an example of the homelessness and poverty of his own time. But the clue to the intended audience is right in front of us; when Jesus has Abraham say that even if someone should rise from the dead, the wealthy oppressors will not listen.

Stop, ask yourself, "Why wouldn't the siblings listen?" No one before or since Jesus has risen from the dead—why wouldn't that change absolutely everything for everyone? Now that we know that death is not the final measure of our lives? Really why shouldn't that change absolutely everything? And that's at the heart of this parable—the Pharisees have institutionalized indifference by twisting the law to their own end. Time and time again, Jesus confronts the powers that be, chiefly the Pharisees, for their twisted readings of scripture. The oppressive powers know what the scriptures say, but they have turned the scriptures to their own purposes. Sure, the powers say, we should take care of the poor--unless the poor are deserving of their fate. Sure, we care for the lost, lonely and those in prison--unless of course, they've violated our pharisaic laws. Or even, if it's inconvenient. The Pharisees have turned the scriptures to their partisan interpretation. By doing so, as in the Gospel this morning, they have institutionalized poverty and legalized the terrible gap between the rich and the poor. The Pharisees and their kind set the scene of this confrontation this morning. The rich and influential are the ones who have legalized the gap

between the rich man and Lazarus. The greater sin of all is kneeling to the Pharisees legalized poverty.

Does this seem just a touch far fetched to you? Isn't this Gospel story real about our personal responsibility? Well, yes, in a way. But like all parables, there are many meanings. When Dickens wrote the Christmas Carol, the picture he painted was not uncommon; the British rich could and were encouraged to ignore the so called, "undeserving poor." Dickens' parable and this Gospel parable then have one major goal in common—both of them were meant not simply as a caution about individual future judgment. Instead, they were meant to warn us that the plight of those in need is right here, right now, right in front of us. Institutions and individuals alike failed Lazarus and Tiny Tim. But, and this is a major point in all the parables, the world does not have to be the way it often is. We can change. We can be compassionate. We can care and we can love. And when we do those simple acts, requiring no legal steps and no special skills, then we can change the world, starting here, starting now. Amen.

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