

Luke 16:19-31 – “Life Choices” – West Point Grey – Sep 26/04

Let me begin by saying that it's a great pleasure to be the guest preacher here this morning. The occasion is the Annual Presbytery Pulpit Exchange, a program whereby ministers within the Presbytery get a chance to meet and experience other congregations, and congregations get to experience other ministers. I suppose it would be dangerous to say that it is a scheme intended to keep congregations and ministers happy with their own!

There are some challenges to be overcome when preaching in another pulpit – getting the ‘flavour’ and flow of the worship service, service times, etc. – but there is another phenomenon that I've encountered. Just as dropped toast will always land butter side down, an occasion to preach in another pulpit seems to always happen on a Sunday when the lectionary texts provide an outstanding challenge. There is, of course, the option of pulling and using an old sermon out of the can, but to do that requires changing the text(s), and a savvy congregation that is accustomed to using the lectionary will spot it immediately, and say, “aha!” Another option is to use a sermon from three years ago, when the same texts came up in the lectionary cycle, but I've always found when I look at a sermon I preached three years ago my reaction is, “I can't believe I preached that!”

So, this morning I'm rising to accept the challenge to preach on the text from Luke, the text dealing with Abraham, Lazarus and an anonymous rich man. “What challenge?”, you might ask. “Isn't this a simple and straightforward little parable?”

Well, yes, and no. It is both simple and complex at the same time, and it's not really a parable, or at least has one totally unique characteristic that sets it apart from all the other parables in the gospels. In addition, it's reasonably well known, so that if I were to refer to it as the “Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus”, just as it is titled, you would most likely nod in recognition, and think that you knew the story – but if I were not Presbyterian and could gamble, I would bet you wouldn't remember the second half of the text. Let's unpack the text, and see if you agree with me.

To begin, I mentioned that this story has a feature not found in any other parable – and that is the use of proper names. The ‘rich man’ is anonymous here, as are all the figures and characters of the other parables; however, the beggar is named Lazarus, and of course we have Abraham, the founding father of the Jewish faith. We could understand Abraham being named, although the story could have used any of the other patriarchs, Moses for example, and still have worked. But why is the beggar given the name Lazarus? You could get a point or two if you waved your hand and said, “it's because of the resurrection theme raised in the second part!” – but you'd have to remember about the resurrection theme in the second part. It's possible that the name Lazarus is meant to do just that, to help our mind connect with the story of Lazarus and his resurrection at the healing hands of Jesus, but we can't be sure if that was the intent.

Another key understanding is to recognize that this story of the rich man and the beggar, and their fortunes reversed in the afterlife, is a story as old as people's understanding of the possibility of there being an afterlife. This story exists in several cultures and in many versions. There's even a relatively modern secular version that is flogged on TV at Christmas time – but with the usual secular happy ending (Tiny Tim and his “God bless us one and all!”) At least seven versions exist in rabbinical sources. Many scholars trace it back to Egypt, where stories of the dead abounded – in that version Osiris is the one who offers a cup of cold water to the blessed dead. By substituting Abraham as the central figure, and adding an extension as a second part of the story, Jesus has turned this into a distinctly Jewish version of the story.

And a wonderful story it is, too, full of rich detail. It's a bit like tuning in to the Space channel, or perhaps Vision TV. It begins like a documentary, starting with the camera focused in on a mound of food on a table, gradually zooming back to reveal the master of the house seated at the table

enjoying this great feast, surrounded by the servants waiting on his every whim. “More wine, master?” “Perhaps another dessert?” The scene shifts to the outside of the house, and pulls back to the street, and we now see a pile of filthy rags bundled up against the corner of the gate. After a few seconds, the pile of rags moves, the camera zooms in, and we discover an unfortunate wretch, covered in sores, too weak from hunger to fend off the dogs licking his sores. We watch as he succumbs to the trials of a very unkind life, and we are relieved as the angels pick him up and carry him off to the shores of a lush and verdant river.

The scene now shifts completely to the edge of town, to the cemetery, and we now see a funeral procession, complete with dignitaries, servants, rabbis, professional paid mourners, the whole nine yards. We recognize the servants of the rich man, and so we know who is the central figure in this funeral. We watch him being placed into the ground, and are as surprised as he is that he just keeps descending, until he arrives in that region of torment pictured so dramatically by Dante: fire, whips, chains and pains. Now that’s bad enough to endure, but to make it even worse was the far-off and unreachable image of the beggar Lazarus side by side with Abraham, enjoying all the heavenly comforts. That sight was too much to bear.

(I thought often of this passage last weekend – I had a pacemaker installed three weeks ago that worked like magic, or a miracle. However, a ago Friday I dutifully reported to the Clinic, where the nurse technician made an incautious adjustment to one of the key parameters. I spent Friday night in Emergency, where after three hours they decided I would live until Monday, when I could get this ‘ultimate pocket PC’ reprogrammed. I felt absolutely terrible, and endured the ‘weekend from hell’ thinking about the two-week glimpse of heaven that had been snatched away with one flick of a stylus on a computer screen, and wondering if I would ever cross the gulf back to that blissful state!)

Abraham’s response to the rich man’s plea for a drop of cool water from Lazarus’ finger was tender, opening with ‘Child’, but still comes down to “tough noogies – you’re finally getting what you deserved – and it’s too late to do anything about it!”

Now, before we go any further, we need to disconnect from the picture here and concentrate on that message. This story was not, and is not, presented as an accurate picture of what heaven looks like, or literally what we will see in the hereafter. Jesus used this well-known story to make a point about ultimate justice, about injustices in life being righted in the afterlife, and most of all about the importance of making some good choices in life. This theme of ultimate justice is one of Luke’s favourite themes. If that was where this story ended, if Jesus had left it there, the message would be a good and even complete message – treat others with justice, even kindness. In fact, the message at that point is so complete we tend to forget what follows, don’t we?

But the story doesn’t end there – Jesus continued with a second part, in which the rich man begs Abraham to send Lazarus to his five brothers, to warn them to mend their ways and avoid the place of torment. Abraham’s answer to this plea is as uncompromising as his first answer. He responds that the scriptures are sufficient – that if they ignore scripture even a resurrection wouldn’t convince them (another of Luke’s favourite themes – recall the Road to Emmaus incident, in which they eyes of the travelers were opened as Jesus taught them scripture, and only then could they recognize the risen Lord). Here, in this second message from the story, prompted by the name Lazarus, we cannot help thinking how even Lazarus being resurrected by Jesus was indeed not enough to convince many to believe, and hear it as a foretelling of final condemnation.

The big question, for me at least, is why did Jesus extend the original story by adding the second part? What is the overall message that comes from combining the two? To answer that big question I believe we need to find what is common to both messages, and also what is different. The theme of ultimate justice, or at least ultimate reckoning, seems to be common to both. It is explicit in

the first part, where we see both the rich man and Lazarus get what they deserve; it is implicit in the second, with a hinted warning that failing to repent will result in unpleasant consequences. It's clear from both parts that appropriate choices need to be made in life. But what choices? The rich man would have argued that his wealth, his comfort, stemmed directly from God, and were a clear signal that he was blessed. He could even have quoted from scripture to support that view, as many still do today. "My cup runneth over" is still seen as a validation from God.

So why then the slur about not listening to Moses and the prophets, about not paying attention to scripture? Perhaps this story is an echo of the previous charge about not being able to serve two masters, about having to make choices about what's important in life.

Well, that's part of it, but I believe Jesus had a much more radical message in mind (as he usually did), and that message is to hear scripture with different ears, to listen for and to hear a message in scripture of God's mercy, justice and grace. I hear an overall message here in the paired story that speaks of not using bits and pieces of scripture to justify one's narrow perception of blessings, especially blessings upon one's self, but instead hearing in scripture, hearing from the risen Christ himself how God's love, compassion, mercy, justice and grace will be visited in ways we never guessed and upon people we could not imagine, just as it was visited upon Lazarus. Not because Lazarus earned God's favour; not because Lazarus kept all the laws of purity; certainly not because Lazarus made all the right and righteous observances – he wouldn't have been allowed within blocks of the temple for fear of contamination; Lazarus is an example of those 'carried away by the angels' in response to God's wish that justice be done.

With his addition, Jesus seems to be making it clear that the key to the life choices we need to make is contained in scripture, in his own message of God's radical grace offered not just to the wealthy, not just to the righteous, not just to those who would be pure and sinless, but that God's grace, mercy, forgiveness, reconciliation is given to those who would hear, and accept. This is one more example of Jesus portraying how God's favour is not, as we would have it, for the apparently deserving, but for those who need it.

So, if we're listening, what are the life choices we need to make? What is it the Lord requires of us? Walk humbly, see that justice is done, love the Lord your God with all that you are. Listen to the scriptures, let your eyes and hearts be opened, rejoice and proclaim the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Join with him and with tax collectors and sinners at his table. Repent of the injustices you have perpetrated, rejoice in the forgiveness offered to you in Christ, invite the beggar to come in and share. See the starving people in Haiti crushing the gates in fearful and desperate hunger. Pause for more than a second to ask how the refugees in the Sudan could be invited to the tables of plenty in the world. Reflect with General Romeo D'Allaire about the nearly one million souls dispatched with such injustice in Rwanda ten years ago. Speak up about the tens of thousands of innocent Iraqi's who have had their country, their houses, their families and lives so completely blasted apart. Walk humbly, do justice, invite the beggar in. So easy to understand, so difficult to do. Thank God for his justice, mercy and grace that even though we are not, indeed cannot be, perfect enough to earn his mercy and favour, nevertheless we are forgiven and accepted into his presence through Christ our Lord – and let us ask Him to guide us in our response to that mercy.