

September 25th, 2022

Luke 16:19-31 “The Other Lazarus”

These parables from Luke just keep getting better and better don't they? And I love it. Jesus is the best when it comes to provocative parables. This is one of those texts that some preachers like to use to put the fear of hell into people's hearts. Few preachers did this more effectively than cartoonist-turned-evangelist Jack Chick. From 1960 until his death in 2016, Chick published these mini-comic books often referred to as “Chick Tracts.” Now remember this because it's important - The sole purpose for these tracts was to warn readers about the possibility of spending eternity in hell. In most cases, Muslims, Jews, Freemasons, Catholics, “sissies” (his favorite designation for those in the LGBTQ community) and anyone else who didn't repent and “accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior” in a *very* specific way would, upon their death, find themselves standing before the throne of a giant, angry, faceless finger-pointing God. This angry God would ask his angelic secretary to check if the person's name appeared in the Book of Life. The angel would say, “His (or her) name does *not* appear.” Then the faceless God would point a finger to the left and say, “Depart from me ye cursed into everlasting fire.” On more than a few occasions, the one who was sent to hell would beg God to let them go back to warn their friends and family about what awaits them. In response, the angry, faceless God would say something like, “No, because if every person had the opportunity to warn their friends and family from beyond the grave, then people would only repent out of fear of hell.” Which is odd considering that repenting out of fear of hell is the *sole purpose* of Chick tracts! Anyway, that's *not* what this parable is about. Eric Fistler, one of my favorite lectionary commentators once wrote, “To say this parable is about the afterlife is like saying that the story of the tortoise and the hare is about what kind of track shoes they wore to their race.”

To put things into context, we're still in the same time and setting as when we started out a few weeks ago with Jesus speaking to scribes,

Pharisees, tax collectors, sinners, and various other people who may or may not know have known him. Most of the lessons had to do with how we deal with relationships in contrast to how we deal with wealth or money. Thus far these parables have been pretty absurd. Jesus spins exaggerated stories with almost cartoonish characters to make his point. Last week we heard the story of a middle-management steward who gave some poor farmers a break after his rich boss told him he was going to be fired for not squeezing enough profit out of the farmers. The steward did this by short-changing the rich boss. And the boss' response was, "Aw, you got me you shrewd little rascal!" Like that would happen in real life! It was a story that didn't make a lot of sense, but in the end the message was, "Don't serve wealth over God and don't love money more than God." What the lectionary didn't give us last week was some Pharisee's response to this parable which is found in verse 14 – "The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him. So he said to them, 'You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God.'"

This week, we've got a story that on the surface sounds like one of those horrific Chick Tracks. But if you read it carefully, it's another story that Jesus used to shock people. It also uses some tongue-in-cheek humor which I know is hard to believe, but the parable starts out with, "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day." You can just picture this guy can't you? "And at his gate, lay a poor man named Lazarus covered with sores." And Jesus includes some descriptive comments here that help his listeners get an even clearer picture. The rich guy is *so* rich he has fancy purple clothes, nice linen underwear and probably a big tummy from all that feasting. Lazarus, on the other hand, is *so* poor that he just sits at the rich guy's gate hoping that he can catch some of the crumbs from the rich guy's table. Lazarus didn't have nice clothes. In fact, he was "clothed" in sores that were so infected that dogs came by and licked them. Gross, right? These are street dogs, and we all know dogs are especially fond of rolling around and eating the worst smelling

things that you can imagine. It's a story that uses some vivid imagery to set the stage for how different these two men are.

Here's the first thing I want you to take note of. What was the rich guy's name? Bradley? Larry? Stuart? We don't know! This rich guy, who I imagine had as much social currency as he had material currency, is not named. But we know the poor guy's name. His name is Lazarus, not to be confused with the other Lazarus who Jesus raised from the dead in John's gospel. The rich man and Lazarus both die around the same time which, if you think about it, sounds like one of those jokes that starts out with, "a priest and a rabbi were walking to the pub, and on the way there they were hit by a bus." Except here it's, "One day a rich guy and a poor guy named Lazarus dropped dead." One of these guys, Lazarus, was taken away by angels to be with Abraham, the father of the tribes of Israel. It *doesn't* say he went to heaven. Our Western Christian minds fill in that blank because that's what we assume. The rich guy, whose name we don't know, was formally buried and went to Hades, the Greek underworld, to be tortured. And again, we fill in the blank and assume this is "hell." There was no nameless, faceless angry God there to tell either one of these men where they belonged. We know the rich guy was Jewish because he referred to Abraham as "Father Abraham." Remember last week how Jesus told the story about the wealthy guy from southern Judea and his steward? Remember how you pictured him? That's who this is, except he was a chubby guy with purple clothes and nice linen underwear. By referring to Abraham as "Father" he was identifying himself as a descendent of Israel. But we don't know his name. And that's important.

While he was there being tortured, the rich man asked Father Abraham to send Lazarus down with some water so he could "cool his tongue." Not, "Father Abraham, could *you* come down here with some cool water?" He said, "Send Lazarus down here." Send the poor guy who had zero importance and zero social currency prior to his death to serve me. Abraham responded to the rich man by calling him "child." Notice Abraham didn't use his name. It's as if he was saying, "Listen,

whatever your name is, you received all the good stuff during your lifetime. Lazarus did not.” Notice Abraham called the one who had no status before he died by name. Abraham also said, “There’s a great chasm between you, who is experiencing great agony, and Lazarus who is here with me.” Some Christians would say, “Yes! That’s the chasm that exists between holy God and sinful humans ... between heaven and hell ... and only the cross of Jesus can bridge that divide!” My goodness we read a lot of extra theological details into these stories that really aren’t there. To borrow an idea from Sigmund Freud, sometimes a chasm is just a chasm. It’s a divide that puts a distance between something or someone and another. In this case, the chasm is the one that Jesus stated so clearly at the beginning of this parable. There’s a huge distance between one who is so wealthy and one who has nothing. There is a huge distance between someone who is so well off that he can wear purple clothes and designer underwear and someone who is so destitute that dogs lick his sores.

The nameless rich man says, “But wait, you’ve got to let me go tell my family about this so that they don’t wind up in this place of torment!” Abraham said, “Yeah, but they’ve already been told by Moses and the prophets. What difference is it going to make even if you are raised from the dead? What makes you think they’d even listen to you? That’s how big this chasm is Mr. Nameless Rich Guy.” Remember the context here. Jesus is five stories into a series of parables that explain how difficult it is to get someone who worships the idol of wealth to look at someone who has nothing with the same dignity and respect as they would someone from their own social caste.

Remember, Jesus does *not* say that all rich people are bad. Jesus had plenty of well-off folks who helped him throughout his ministry. Jesus is saying that the *love* of Mammon ... the love of the idol of wealth is what’s bad. And to the ones who scoff at him for saying that the wealthy and the poor have an equal place at God’s table, he says: “You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the

sight of God.” In two chapters, Jesus will say to a ruler who equates wealth with divine favor, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” That’s how big the chasm is. Okay, but we know better now, right? We live in a land and age of opportunity. What’s the lesson here for us? The lesson is that the chasm still exists and always will exist. Does it really? Consider some of these examples I read on Buzzfeed this last week about how out of touch some people can be who don’t understand how the “rest of us” and especially “the least of us” live -

There was a recently graduated college student who was told by a rich friend that now that she’s out of school, she really needed to buy some apartments and rent them out for extra money. Only they failed to tell this student from whence the money to buy these apartments would come. She was still trying to figure out how she was going to pay off her student loans! Speaking of student loans, someone else was told by a friend that you shouldn’t take out student loans if you can’t afford college. And if you haven’t saved enough money and *do* decide to go, you should be able to get by on working two or three jobs to get through school. When asked if that’s what their friend did, they discovered their friend’s *parents* paid for college *and* living expenses.

In another example, a guy was grumbling about the price of gas. His wealthy friend said, “If you think gas is so expensive, then you should just go buy an electric car.” To which he replied, “If I’m not able to pay \$50 to fill up my gas tank, I’m sure as heck not going to be able to buy a new car, electric or otherwise!” I hear this one a lot – “You should move to a less-expensive state.” Like it’s as simple as changing deodorant brands. Gen X and Millennials love hearing this one - “You’re wasting your money on rent. You should buy a house.” Speaking of buying houses, one person recalls a piece of advice that one of his wealthy friends offered - “Never buy a used house.” And then there’s everyone’s favorite financial advice - “You need to save up at least \$50,000 for an emergency fund.” Thanks. I’ll just go do that as I’m drowning in medical debt because I can’t afford insurance. And

even if my employer had insurance perks, they wouldn't cover my pre-existing medical issues.

This is the great chasm that divides those whose priorities and values are tied up in the Kingdoms of the Earth and its god "Mammon" from those whose priorities are aligned with the Kingdom of God and its savior Jesus who tells us to, "forgive our debts, as we forgive our debtors."