

C Lectionary 26 9.29.19

Luke 16:19-31

Focus Statement: Jesus crossed the chasm.

Gloria's teaching Sunday school this morning, and when we read this passage on Wednesday, she joked that on first read she thought her lesson for the kids should be, "well kids, you better be good and be nice to other people, or else you're going to hell." We laughed, and don't worry Javana, it hopefully goes without saying that is NOT what Gloria is teaching the children in Sunday school, but it does get to the central question of this text, what are we to do with this parable?

Last week I mentioned that money and wealth is Jesus' second most favorite topic to teach on, second only to the Kingdom of God, and here it is coming up again this morning.

Theologian R. Alan Culpepper sees the parable of the rich man and Lazarus as the capstone moment in Jesus' prophetic critique of wealth in Luke's Gospel. In Mary's song, the one we're currently singing as the song of praise during the Eucharistic prayer, Mary declared that God "has brought the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly," and at Jesus' baptism, John the Baptist told the crowd that they should not take comfort in having Abraham as an ancestor, "for God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham." In this passage we see that foretold reversal taking place, as the rich man is brought low to Hades while Lazarus is raised up to the side of Abraham. And actually the Greek is even more provocative. Lazarus is brought to Abraham's "bosom," which in Jewish tradition is the place of highest bliss, the place where martyrs were brought as a reward for their sacrifice. Lazarus in this parable is not just in heaven, he is an honored guest, seated at the place of prestige at the banquet feast of the Lord. Meanwhile, the rich man, who saw

himself as a child of Abraham, who called Abraham father, and was even called “child” by Abraham, is in Hades, separated from the feast by an insurmountable chasm. Throughout Luke’s Gospel, we heard the message that the last shall be first and the first shall be last, in this parable, we are shown an image of that very declaration. “Child,” Abraham told Lazarus, “remember that in 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.”

And since we’re at that part of the story, let’s talk a little bit about this chasm, where did it come from? One possibility is the man built it himself. He built it when he walked past Lazarus laying at his gate again, and again, and again throughout their lives, never seeing Lazarus, never acknowledging his need. How simple it would have been for the rich man to do something, anything, to ease Lazarus’ suffering, but instead he continuously walked by, digging that chasm deeper and deeper. So accustomed to the presence of the chasm was the rich man that even in death he continued to dig deeper and deeper into it. That, I think, is the rich man’s sin, not that he never helped Lazarus, he never even saw Lazarus. Not as a person at least, not as an equal. Even from Hades, the rich man begged Abraham to “send Lazarus,” first to cool his tongue, and then to speak to his brothers. Lazarus remained nothing more than a set-piece in the rich man’s mind, a tool to be used, a servant to be ordered around as he pleased. The chasm the rich man created in life was not only fixed in place at his death, but it continued to grow, as he continued to push Lazarus away. This is the danger of dishonest wealth, the “mammon of wickedness,” as the Greek phrases it, it separates us, isolates us, draws us from each other and ultimately from God.

So “then who can be saved,” to take a phrase from Matthew’s Gospel? We go to church, we read scripture, to find hope, and hope seems in short supply in this parable. Hang with me, there is hope, there is good news, I promise we’ll get there. But first, let’s ask the question that is often key to unlocking a parable, who are we to be in this story? Are we the rich man, condemned to an eternity of suffering for mistakes we did not even realize we were making? Or are we Lazarus, tortured through life so that we can reap a final reward after we die? I don’t know about you, but both seem like pretty terrible options to me. Both also seem hopeless, fatalistic, and not in line with the God I read about in scripture. Was Lazarus really forced to suffer such agony and torment so that he could be rewarded in heaven? And was the rich man really without redemption? Was there no hope for him in the end, no possibility of repentance, no opportunity to turn and be saved? Let me pose then a third option, rather than the rich man or Lazarus, what if we are the brothers? Like the brothers, after all, we have Moses and the prophets, and like the brothers, our story is not yet set. We still have the opportunity to repent, to be different, to live different.

And, I promised there would be good news, here’s the good news. The parable as Jesus told it, is not how the story actually lived out. Because the parable ended with despair, “neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.” There would be no point in sending Lazarus, the brothers would not be changed. But, dear friends in Christ, Lazarus was not the one who was raised from the dead, Jesus was. And Jesus didn’t rise from the dead to convince us to believe, Jesus rose from the dead to close the chasm itself. What that means is that on this side of the resurrection, there is no chasm. Lazarus couldn’t cross it to

soothe the rich man or to warn his brothers, but Jesus didn't just cross it, Jesus canceled it out entirely.

What the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ did, dear people of God, is it transforms this parable from a threat to an opportunity. What the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ does is it invites us, since the chasm between us and God is closed, to think about how we then can cross chasms between us and others.

Dear friends in Christ, because of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, this parable is not threat. It is challenge. Don't get me wrong, this is hard stuff, this is hard work, but it is not threat. Rather it is opportunity, it is invitation, to be about the work of crossing chasms. As Lutherans we preach a cruciform, a cross-shaped faith. Since the chasm between us and God is bridged by Christ, we then get to be about the work of bridging the chasm between us and others. So in light of the resurrection, this parable is about challenging us to see others whom we may have ignored, whom we may not have noticed, and reach out to them. This parable is meant to shake us out of our comfort zones, to be alert to those around us, that their presence might change us.

The good news of this parable is acts of service are transformational not to those we serve, but to us. When we help our neighbor, when we reach out to others, what we will find is we are the ones being changed. You are seen by God, you are loved by God. Take that promise, see others, love others, and you will be transformed. Thanks be to God. Amen.