

Sept. 25, 2022
Christ the Servant, Reston
Pentecost 16
Luke 16:19-31

Did you realize that the parable we heard this morning was the only parable in which anybody is given a name? Think about it. In the parable of the Good Samaritan nobody is given a name. In the parable of the sower, even the sower is not named. It is the message – not the people in Jesus’ parables which are important. But in the parable we heard this morning one of the two men has a name – and his name is Lazarus. This is a colorful story.

The other man is a rich man who dressed in purple and fine linen. We’ll call him rich John Doe. Lazarus is the poor man covered with sores who lay at rich John Doe’s gate. Both men died and both ended up in Hades. Now, to understand this parable you need to know that, in ancient Jewish thought, Hades (or Sheol) was a gloomy subterranean pit to which the spirits of all people went after death.

As the concept of resurrection came into Judaism it was thought that this underworld pit (Hades) would serve as a separating point of the righteous from the wicked before the resurrection took place. One part of Hades represented Gehenna, a fiery pit. This fiery pit was a place of final punishment. This is where the rich John Doe in this parable ends up – tortured by fire.

Lazarus, however, ended up in the part of Hades which represented Paradise – the final resting place of the righteous. There, Lazarus rests on the very bosom of Father Abraham (and, by extension, God).

Lazarus and the rich John Doe can see each other across this vast pit of Hades, but they cannot connect. The rich John Doe calls out, “Father Abraham, have mercy on me and send Lazarus to give me water.” But Abraham delivers to him the line which is really the crux of this parable. He says to the rich John Doe, “Child, remember that during 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. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.” The rich John Doe then makes a plea for his family which is still above ground, still alive. Save them before it is too late! Father Abraham turns down his request.

Now, why did I call the rich man John Doe? To emphasize that Jesus intentionally did not name him, but chose, instead, to give the poor man a name – Lazarus. In the kingdom of God the rich man is nameless. It is a theme which is repeated time and again throughout Jesus’ teaching and parables. Those who think they are first in this world are last in God’s kingdom, and those who are considered last in this world are first in God’s kingdom.

In addition, this is a parable about the redistribution of wealth. It is! What is the sin of the rich John Doe? He didn’t feed hungry Lazarus. Pure and simple – he didn’t help the poor and hungry. Jesus’ message here is the same as it was when he spoke of the separation of the sheep from the goats in the kingdom of God. The favored sheep would be those who feed the hungry. The outcast goats would be those who refused to feed the hungry.

There is no way to spiritualize this parable. It is not a parable about faith. It is not a parable about going to church. It is not a parable about

accepting or not accepting Jesus. It is a parable about feeding people who don't have food in their stomachs.

Who are we in this parable? Well, as I turn into Hunter's Woods Plaza on my way to church I pass by a Wing Factory, an Asian Restaurant, a Mexican restaurant, a sandwich shop, a grocery store, not to mention the Japanese Restaurant across the street. If I'm not hungry for any of that I could keep on going around to the Tea Place, the donut shop, and the hamburger joint. Who am I in this parable? I am rich John Doe the one who has all the world's foods right at his fingertips.

How about Lazarus? Who is the contemporary Lazarus in this parable? Well, Lazarus is crawling out of a hut in a third-world emerging nation. He doesn't have a grocery store to go to. He used to have grain fields from which to gather. However, climate change has pushed the desert northward into his village and he has nothing to eat at all except what Lutheran World Relief is able to get to him – that is when the armed thugs who terrorize his village don't steal the bags and sell them on the black market. One Lazarus dies of starvation somewhere in the world every three and a half seconds.

In the parable, Lazarus sat at rich John Doe's doorstep. We have poverty at our doorstep, too. Our county is one of the wealthiest in the United States. Yet, in Fairfax County over 1800 people are homeless. Many more than that are hungry. In addition to dealing with abject poverty, many of these people struggle with substance abuse. Our partnership with Cornerstones is one way our congregation addresses this issue. Ten years ago we had homeless sleeping on benches in front of the church and in tents in back. We had homeless sleeping in our furnace room in the winter until the fire department put a stop to that. Cornerstones had done a wonderful job of getting many of these people

into their own apartments. We still work with the Hunters Woods Neighborhood Coalition in addressing these issues when they pop up. Progress has been made. We also support the South Lakes food pantry. When our congregation made a decision to be a church in a shopping center we took on a unique opportunity to minister to those about us. We care about our neighborhood. We don't always know what to do, but we care.

So many times we mistake wealth as a sign of God's favor and we find poverty as a sign of God's punishment. But God turns that view upside down. In this parable there is what one commentator calls a "divine reversal." Justice is given to the poor man. A name is given to the poor man, Lazarus.

Pray for the homeless. Think about justice. It was the poor man who was given a name.