

“There Were These Two Guys...”

Here’s another story for you: A minister dies and, resplendent in his clerical collar and colorful robes, waits in line at the Pearly Gates. Just ahead of him is a guy dressed in sunglasses, a loud shirt, leather jacket, and jeans. Saint Peter addresses this guy, "Who are you, so that I may know whether or not to admit you to the Kingdom of Heaven?" The guy replies, "I'm Joe Green, taxi-driver, of Noo Yawk City." Saint Peter consults his list, smiles and says to the taxi-driver, "Take this silken robe and golden staff, and enter into the Kingdom."

So the taxi-driver enters Heaven with his robe and staff, and the minister is next in line. Without being asked, he proclaims, "I am Michael O'Connor, head pastor of Saint Mary's for the last forty-three years." Saint Peter consults his list and says, "Take this cotton robe and wooden staff and enter the Kingdom of Heaven." "Just a minute," says the preacher, "that man was a taxi-driver, and you issued him a silken robe and golden staff. But I get wood and cotton. How can this be?" "Up here, we go by results," says Saint Peter. "While you preached, people slept -- while he drove, people prayed."

Now, how many of you think that story gives an accurate portrayal of what goes on with human beings after death? Well, of course not. It’s a joke, a fanciful story told with humorous intent, although it does have a point to make about the craziness of our world where more fervent prayer is likely in some taxis than in some churches. I tell that story this morning because it’s my contention that it has a lot in common with our parable. Even though whole theologies of heaven and hell have been built around this passage, I don’t think Jesus had any intention of teaching about the afterlife when he told his story. He uses it as a device to illuminate his point, much the same way that Charles Dickens used the supernatural elements of “A Christmas Carol” to tell a story about the dangers of miserliness and greed and the true meaning of the Christmas spirit. The point of Jesus’ story is a here-and-now lesson, a message for us about how life is to be lived, not what happens after we die. If I do a better job than Michael O’Connor in the joke and you are still awake at the end of this sermon, you may hear a minor point about heaven and hell but I assure you, it’s far from my primary focus this morning.

I’m convinced that the focus of this story comes clear when we look at it in terms of its larger context. The Gospel according to Luke, as you may recall, has a greater emphasis than any of the other gospels on Jesus’ teachings on money and the treatment of the poor. Indeed, Luke begins this emphasis with the way he relates the very beginnings of the Jesus story, with his telling of the encounter between Mary of Nazareth and her cousin, Elizabeth, when both women have become pregnant in miraculous ways. After being hailed by Elizabeth as blessed among women and as the mother of the Lord, Mary praises God: “the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; *he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.*” In Luke 4, we find what many have called Jesus’ mission statement, including Isaiah’s words, “he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.” God’s planned reversal of fortune for the rich and the poor also gets prime place in Luke’s recollection of the Beatitudes pronounced by Jesus: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh... But woe to you who are rich, for

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you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.”

We cannot dismiss the idea of God’s judgment on the rich and consolation of the poor as just a peculiarity of Luke’s understanding of Jesus’ message. Luke is simply pointing out that Jesus stands in solidarity with the prophetic tradition in Israel. As the one who has come to fulfill the scripture, Jesus takes into his own message of good news the core of the word given by God to the former prophets. Listen to our lectionary passage from the Old Testament this morning, drawn from the sixth chapter of Amos: “Alas for those who are at ease in Zion, and for those who feel secure on Mount Samaria... Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall; who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, and like David improvise on instruments of music; who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph! Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile, and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away.” Amos, a farmer from Judah, was sent by God to prophesy to the court of the Northern Kingdom, Israel, where a temporary weakness in the great powers of Egypt and Assyria had led to booming trade and prosperity, albeit a very unequal prosperity. The rich had enough resources to feast on only the finest, to drink to excess and to while away their time. The poor, as always, suffered and God heard their cries.

Nor are messages from Christian preachers about God’s concern with how we handle the fruits of God’s blessings to us a recent development of liberal theology. The lectionary epistle passage for today is I Timothy 6:6-19, in which I think you will hear connections not only to this morning’s Gospel but to last week’s as well: “we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains... As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.”

Hearing the story of the rich man and the beggar Lazarus in conjunction with its greater context gives us a solid sense of the story’s theme, that God is especially concerned with the poor and that the pursuit of wealth at the expense of others or our relationship with God is a hollow, empty way to live life. Let’s take some time now to unlock some of the story’s metaphors and details, to be sure that we understand as much as we can of what would have seemed obvious to Jesus’ original audience. We first hear about the unnamed rich man, who is so wealthy that he can afford to be dressed in purple and fine linen and feast sumptuously every day. In that time, the wearing of purple, a royal color, was limited not only by one’s ability to pay for the extremely expensive dye or dyed cloth but by Roman law. Our first character has enough money to not only pay for a complete wardrobe of purple cloth and delicate undergarments (that’s the fine linen) but enough to either satisfy the laws of Rome about his place in society or at least to bribe the authorities to look the other way. He also apparently has an extensive staff of slaves, who

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dress him and cannot complain of a lack of a day of rest on the Sabbath – remember, the man feasts *every* day.

Just as the rich man is dressed by others every day, so Lazarus has been the beneficiary of an act of someone else, although perhaps only once. The NRSV does not reflect the witness of some ancient manuscripts in Arabic and Syriac which, along with many English translations, say that Lazarus “was laid at his gate.” Someone has taken steps to bring Lazarus to this place. Perhaps his family or his friends, recognizing that his need was far beyond their ability to meet, brought him to the house of the richest man in town, depending on the rich man’s good nature or piety to take care of Lazarus. As I read the story this week, I was reminded of the African villager who thrust his young son into the midst of Madonna’s safari entourage, hoping, apparently, that the boy would be taken to a better future by the rich American lady. Somebody was concerned about Lazarus. Just not the rich man.

Why did their tactic not work? Well, if we want to be generous to the rich man, we might say it was because Lazarus was unclean. His running sores would have rendered anyone who touched or came too near him ritually unclean as well. But even so, he might have at least expected to share some of the food thrown to the dogs – in the eyes of an observant Jew, dogs were as unclean as a pus-y sore but they at least had their uses. They could be used as guard animals and were fed scraps. At a house like our rich man’s, there would have been plenty of scraps, including the pieces of bread that were used in those times instead of napkins. When your hands got too greasy during a feast, you wiped them down with a bit of bread which was then thrown away. Lazarus would have been glad even for those greasy, dirty cast-offs.

That may sound disgusting to us, but it is still the lot of the poor in places in our world. Journalist Sonia Nazario has written a book called Enrique’s Journey, a book about the appalling conditions faced by the poor in countries as close to us as Mexico and Honduras. Nazario tells the story of how children in Honduras must scavenge for food in landfills and garbage heaps: “[Children] as young as six and seven . . . have to root through the waste in order to eat. Truck after truck rumbles onto the hilltop. Dozens of adults and children fight for position. Each truck dumps its load. Feverishly, the scavengers reach up into the sliding ooze to pluck out bits of plastic, wood, and tin. The trash squishes beneath their feet, moistened by loads from hospitals, full of blood and placentas. Occasionally a child, with hands blackened by garbage, picks up a piece of stale bread and eats it. As the youngsters sort through the stinking stew, black buzzards soar in a dark, swirling cloud and defecate on the people below.”

There was a stream of theology, then as now, that said that whatever people got on earth was what they deserved. If one man was rich, it was because he was in good favor with God. If another, like Lazarus, was poor and unclean, it was a reflection of the state of his soul. That would have likely been a popular view among the Pharisees who were in the crowd hearing Jesus’ story. They might have been surprised when Jesus went on to tell of the cosmic reversal for Lazarus and the rich man. Lazarus, whose name, by the way, means “God will help,” is in heaven with Abraham; the rich man is in a place of torment.

Jesus was saying something important when he used Abraham in his story as Lazarus’ host in the afterlife. Yes, Abraham was a holy man, the “Friend of God,” and yes, Abraham was the

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ancestor of all the Jews, their exemplar and the basis of their status as God’s Chosen. But, you know, the Bible tells us that Abraham was quite, quite rich, one of the wealthiest men of his day. So it wasn’t simply the riches of the first character in the story that got him in trouble. The great 4th century Christian preacher John Chrysostom points to the answer: “It is worthwhile inquiring why the rich man saw Lazarus in Abraham’s arms, and not in the company of some other righteous person. The reason is that Abraham was hospitable, and so the sight of Lazarus with Abraham was meant to reproach the rich man for his own inhospitality. Abraham used to pursue even passers-by and drag them into his home, whereas the rich man disregarded someone lying in his own doorway...”

The words of the rich man call attention to his failings. “Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue.” He knew his name. He wasn’t blithely unaware of the man who’d been dying of hunger outside his house. He knew who he was and ignored him all the same. And even now, when Lazarus is cared for by the most revered figure in the history of Israel and he himself is being punished, he sees Lazarus only as a tool for his own use, to soothe his tongue, to warn his family. The lack of concern for others that allowed him to pass by Lazarus every day in life has not left him in death.

If you are having trouble with my original description of this parable as a sort of 1st century “Pearly Gates” joke, perhaps you will at least grant the presence of Jesus’ ironic wit in Abraham’s final response to the rich man. “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.” Remember that this story was being told at least in part for the behalf of the Pharisees who’d been heckling Jesus. They, above all Israel, knew the teachings of Moses and the prophets but Jesus rails against them again and again for failing to put those teachings into action. They knew them in their heads but not in their hearts. They didn’t “listen” to them. Jesus’ own resurrection isn’t going to make a whit of difference for them. They will deny it happened and go on with business as usual and a dirty business it is, too. They’ll go on claiming God’s favor as long as things are good for them and sneering at those who are in need as unworthy.

So, what about us? Are we satisfied with the status quo? Do we see ourselves, the privileged children of an abundant land, as specially blessed by God? Do we look down on the homeless, the addicted, the desperate and the broken as simply belonging to the class of “those people?” Will we add our voices to those who preach that the poor are simply lazy, that those with AIDS are paying the price for their sinful lives, that peace in the Middle East is not possible because “those people have been fighting for centuries.” If we fall into the easy smugness of the Pharisees, then we have failed in the compassion that Jesus taught, the love that God has for all of Creation. Jesus tells this story to remind his listeners that our God is the God who turns things upside down. The cross is the proof. If Jesus had simply lived out a long life as a revered teacher and died peacefully of old age, his resurrection might have been surprising but it would not have been the world-changing event that we claim it to be. No, Jesus was betrayed by a friend, condemned by his own, executed in a manner befitting the worst kind of criminal. In a world-view that says God makes sure we get what is coming to us here in this world, it is a fate inexplicable for a good man. But the gentle teacher, the fiery prophet, the executed criminal is the same as the risen Christ. The world condemned Jesus, but God raised him up and gave him

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the name above all names. The simple morality of cause and effect is shattered. God’s grace and love are stronger than any moral code created by human beings.

The story of Lazarus the beggar leaves us with another question as well. Are we hospitable? At the end of the sermon I quoted earlier, John Chrysostom left his congregation with this word: “Anyone wishing to show kindness should not inquire into other people’s lives, but has only to alleviate their poverty and supply their needs, as Christ commanded when he said: Imitate your Father in heaven, who makes his sun rise on good and bad alike, and sends rain on the just and the unjust.” As modern commentator Brian Stoffregen reminds us, “True charity is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not spasmodic or superficial. Ameliorations such as food and medicine are necessary, but there is a more fundamental neighborliness. ‘Fundamental neighborliness,’ therefore, is the barometer of the soul, an indication of the attitude of one’s heart that is prized in the sight of God. One doesn’t have to be rich in order to be neighborly.” Abraham brought perfect strangers into his camp to feed them. Jesus taught that we are to invite to our banquets those who cannot repay. We are called not merely to show some kindness to the broken ones who find their way to our door, but to go out and search for those who need help, for the lost sheep of our Father’s pasture.

One final thought, the minor point on heaven and hell that I promised at the start. I’ve never had any trouble believing in the afterlife and heaven. The stories of near-death experiences are a welcome but unnecessary evidence of what I know in an unscientific but profound way. But I’ve always had trouble reconciling my understanding of a loving God with a doctrine of eternal torment for some. I won’t go into my many wrestlings with this issue, they’re not really germane although I’d be glad to sit sometime with anyone who’s interested and hash through the whole thing. But something I read recently connected strongly with this story. Brian McLaren’s recent book, The Last Word and the Word After That, is the conclusion to a trilogy in which he uses dialogue between characters (à la Plato) to work out the theology of what he calls “A New Kind of Christianity.” In The Last Word..., one character talks about what it must be like to be in the presence of God for judgment after death, for Jesus affirmed that all humans come to God’s judgment seat. McLaren’s character says, in essence, that to stand before our Loving Creator with full knowledge of every petty, ugly or stupid thing he had ever done, would be intensely painful, like burning, not because God was punishing him but because he would be so ashamed of disappointing God. My friends, I cannot think of those words without deep emotion. I have done the things I ought not to have done and left undone the things I ought to have done. I have ignored the needs of others; I have failed to reach out. But now, hear with me the Good News. We are God’s beloved children. God loves us so much that God became a human and lived and died to show us the way to life. God stands ready to forgive us everything. And just to make sure that we understood that we and all the poor and broken are essential, honored guests at the Banquet of God, the broken, despised Jesus arose on that Sunday long ago. In Christ, we find our life, abundant and everlasting. Thanks be to God.