

“The Rich Man and Lazarus”

Luke 16:19-31

30 September 2007

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“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’ But Abraham said, ‘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.’ He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house— for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

Prayer.

Our Gospel passage for today is a parable of Jesus, a story about a broken man named Lazarus, but more so, it is a story about a rich man, commonly known as Di-ves. This parable is a cap stone in Luke, a pinnacle of successive stories Jesus uses to teach about the dangers of wealth.

- When we experience this story, consider a small voice in the background, Mary declaring her praise of God in the first chapter of Luke: “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.”
- When we experience this story, consider a quiet, angry voice in the third chapter of Luke, John the Baptist warning “God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham,” and “the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”
- When we experience this story, consider the voice of Jesus who just taught in the

1/4

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sixth chapter of Luke that “the kingdom of God belongs to the poor and the hungry, but woe to those who are rich and who are full.”

This is the only parable Jesus tells where he includes a name for the subject: Lazarus. Lazarus was a despised man, despised by everyone who came to see or know him. He threw himself at the gate of a rich man so that he might beg; perhaps even obtain some of the wasted bread used to clean the rich man's dirty fingers. Lazarus was covered with sores, the way Jesus tells the story. He was so weak, he couldn't prevent the dogs from licking his sores. Lazarus was created by Jesus to be as pathetic as possible.

Jesus' audience of rich Pharisees probably were saying to themselves, what did he do to deserve this? for it was believed that hardships were caused by God as a result of unrighteous behavior.

Lazarus dies, Jesus continued his tale. Did he die of starvation? disease? infection? or did the dogs ...? We don't know: Jesus never tells us. Throughout this parable, Lazarus is never spoken to, and he never speaks. Angels came, gathered him up in a divine act of mercy, and carried him to Abraham. There, Lazarus completes eternity in the bosom of father Abraham. The lowly is lifted up.

Then, Jesus continues, there is the rich man, Di-ves. This is really a parable about him. He lives a pampered life, dressed like royalty in purple robes and fine linen, feasting sumptuously every day, using bread to wipe his greasy fingers and throwing it on the floor.

Take a look at Jesus' audience: they are Pharisees, living a pampered life, dressed like royalty in purple robes and fine line, feasting sumptuously every day, using bread to wipe their greasy fingers and throwing it on the floor.

The rich Pharisees probably thought he was blessed by God, and because of his good deeds, had been blessed abundantly. He overlooked the fact that he had Lazarus at his gate. In fact *his table and his gate* separated himself from all the riffraff of society.

Di-ves died and was buried (notice the contrast). He was taken to hell; Hades, as it is called. He was tormented and in flames. But he could look up; far away, in heaven he could see Lazarus in the bosom of Abraham. He recognized Lazarus! This dirt bag knew Lazarus enough to avoid him on earth, and to recognize him in heaven. He had seen Lazarus at his gate and remembered his face!

In the torments and flames of hell, Di-ves speaks as if Lazarus didn't exist. (Jesus tells a great parable, doesn't he?).

“Father Abraham,” he calls, hoping to play his trump card (I'm one of your children, a child

of Israel). “Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I’m in agony in these flames.” He acts with callous disregard.

He acts as if Lazarus is his servant. What nerve! Agh! Abraham rebuffs him the first of three times: “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.”

Di-ves tries a second time, “Father” (another foolish attempt to play on Abraham’s goodness), send Lazarus “to my father’s house- for I have five brothers- that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.”

The rich man still acts with callous disregard. He still doesn’t get it. Lazarus isn’t a second class citizen. The wealthy man is selfishly looking out for his own family, and no one else.

Abraham rebuffs him a second time, “They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.” Listen to the words of Moses in Deuteronomy, as I’m certain the rich Pharisees did,

“Do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor.” (Deuteronomy 15:7)

Consider the prophet, Isaiah, who spoke

“Is not this the fast that I choose; to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cloth them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?” (Isaiah 58:6-7)

“No, father Abraham,” Di-ves attempts for a third time, 'send Lazarus, “if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.” Consider all those who witness resurrection, in hind-sight consider those confronted with the witness of Jesus’ resurrection who still do not believe. “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”

I have to admit, I have a hard time believing in hell. How could a loving, perfect God create something so eternally bad? To drive fear into people’s hearts, to scare us into compliance, or to force us to behave?

Oh, please. This is so utterly simplistic, it must have its origins in human myth and fairy tale.

But then I turn on the news and hear about hell, day-in and day-out.

I still believe in a God of grace and love, mercy and forgiveness. And I still don't believe God created hell. But I do believe that each of us creates our own hell.

We create hell when we act with callous disregard for human suffering. We create hell when we stereotype and marginalize, when we talk down to people, when we use phrases "like them."

We create hell when we hurt other people, either intentionally or unintentionally. We create our own hell when we act as if we were better than someone else. We create our own hell when we allow abundance, wealth or food to come between us and someone in need.

We create our own hell when we refuse to forgive and can't ask for forgiveness. We create our own hell when we fail to love.

Hell is everything we believe, say, and do that separates us from our God. Although nothing can separate God from us, hell is everything we do to separate ourselves from God.

Then when we die, the hell we've created, is fixed we are told, "so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us."

Unquenchable fire. Gnashing of teeth. Everlasting torment. Fire and flames. The ability to look into heaven and see the results of our evil ways. Yes, these are images we are given of hell, the hell that is fixed after our death. These are images that Jesus gives to us. They serve as a warning.

Ir-regardless how one makes the journey, the results in the end are the same. Hell is fixed after our death, but, so too is heaven. The only decision left up to us then, is the destination that we seek.

The Word of the Lord, as it has come to me. Thanks be to God. Amen.