

“The Parables According to Luke, Part Seven: Brothers”
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for July 17th 2016 (Ninth Sunday after Pentecost)
by Foster Freed

Luke 16: 19-31

And so we find ourselves, this morning, very much on the home-stretch: on the home-stretch of our consideration of the parables found exclusively in the Gospel According to Luke. And it is worth noting...worth noting at the outset, that the three final parables we shall examine over our final three weeks, are linked by the fact that all three involve a contrast between two characters: a stark contrast between characters who have made radically different life-choices, and are now facing radically different consequences as a result of their choices. Next week, the contrast will be between a Pharisee and a Publican, both of whom are at prayer, but only one of whose prayers receive our Lord's approval. The following week—the final week in this 9 week series—the contrast will be between two sons, one might say two prodigal sons, only one of whom appears to appreciate their father's magnanimity. As for this week...

As for this week, the contrast—and it could not be a sharper contrast—is between a terribly wealthy man, and a man who by any standards must be counted as terrifyingly impoverished. And yet, as the parable makes clear, at the end of their earthly lives, there will be a great reversal: with the poor man warmly welcomed into the bosom of Abraham, while the man rich on this earth suffers torments in a place that seems to be infinitely distant from the love of God.

Attention should be paid...attention paid to the fact that Jesus, with the telling of this parable, is articulating a wisdom that is at the heart of the Old Testament, particularly the wisdom that animates the words of Ancient Israel's prophets. For while it's true that much of the prophetic anger was directed toward idolatry, an equal measure was directed at those who neglected the poor! And no: it's not as if the rich man of this parable needed to look far in order to locate the poor! On the contrary: Lazarus lived just outside the gates...just outside the gates of this rich man who is said to have feasted sumptuously each and every day, in the process neglecting a man right outside his doors, so impoverished and so disease riddled, that even the dogs licked his wounds.

And for me...for me there is a very real sense in which we are right smack dab back in the same territory we traversed six weeks ago, when we pondered the Parable of the Good Samaritan. As I noted at the time, the foundational meaning of that parable is hardly obscure; much the same, I think, can be said of this morning's parable. And yet it raises a host...a wide host of practical, lived questions: questions that none of us can afford to duck.

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As most of you realize, I drive into work each morning from Parksville. Whether I exit the highway just before the Woodgrove Mall, or exit just past that Mall, there are often people looking for a handout. Some of the signs they flash at motorists contain but a one-word plea for help. One especially thoughtful sign—perhaps this chap was once in advertising—reads: “Times are tough; please help out.” But whether the sign is elaborate or simple (and most are scratched out on rudely cut dark cardboard), they pose the same challenge for **me** that the presence of Lazarus posed to that rich man. Do I help? And if so: how do I help? I would be lying to you...would be lying to you were I to pretend that there are any easy answers. But I must say...

I must say that I was recently struck by the practice one member of this congregation undertakes whenever they find themselves in an area where they are likely to be asked for spare change. In such a circumstance, this person makes it their practice to always carry enough coin so that they can give something to each person who approaches them. Needless to say: not one of those folks who approach our friend are going to emerge from that encounter with enough money to buy a new car! But they will be given something...something that at the very least acknowledges their humanity. And I know...

I know such a practice will raise huge alarm bells for others. I know that others will worry that such indiscriminate generosity will help those whom we once described as the “undeserving” poor as well as those we once described as the “deserving” poor. The problem, of course, is that it is no simple matter—perhaps that’s why these terms fell out of favour—no easy matter to distinguish the one from the other. Others, still, will worry that such indiscriminate generosity will simply empower the addictions of those who are on the street as the result of their addictions. I suspect our friend would simply remind us that even an addict is a child of God...and deserves to have at least one person stop, look them in the eye, place a coin in their hand, and offer them a greeting and a smile. It’s hard to argue with that...just as it’s hard to argue with the anger this parable directs at a wealthy man who did not appear to stop even once—not once—to encounter the poor man at his gate.

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I mentioned earlier...mentioned earlier how the challenge posed by this parable reminds me, in at least some ways, of the challenge posed by the Parable of the Good Samaritan. And there is, I think, a further parallel between the two stories: because each, I believe, raises and seeks to answer an important question. In the case of the Parable of the Good Samaritan, the question is the one asked by the lawyer just prior to the telling of the parable, namely: “who is my neighbour?” That parable seeks to answer that question. But while it may not be the case that a similar question gives birth to this morning’s parable, I believe that the parable itself asks a similar question: not “who is my neighbour?” but perhaps even more profoundly: “Who is my brother?”

Consider! Consider that the rich man in the story—when he sees Lazarus comfortably resting side by side with Father Abraham—the rich man has the temerity to ask Abraham to have Lazarus fetch him some water! This guy is a slow learner, isn't he! But then he makes a further request, and while this request also involves putting poor Lazarus to work, it's hard to deny that it involves a somewhat more generous impulse: asking Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers so they may avoid his fate, sort of like Jacob Marley warning Scrooge! That request is denied, as is the follow-up request to send someone back from the dead—we'll explore all of that further in a few minutes—but it would be churlish to pretend that there is not at least something worthy in the impulse that impels the rich man to hope his brothers might fare better than he has fared.

But it seems to me...it seems to me that the parable positively shouts out for us to wonder why the rich man was so incapable (and appears to remain incapable) of regarding **Lazarus** as his brother. And you know: in many ways we're right back in the same thematic zone we occupied a few weeks ago when Phyllis Thompson was guest preaching. On that Sunday, our parable included Christ's warning that we, when we host a banquet, shouldn't merely invite friends and family who will repay us in kind, but ought to be opening our doors to those who cannot possibly be expected to repay us. And frankly...frankly, that whole theme of showing hospitality to the least...that theme of treating the stranger and the alien, the poor and the homeless...with the same spirit of hospitable loving-kindness we instinctively show family and friends....

...frankly...it's one of the toughest of all of Christ's teachings, especially for us introverts who find it hard enough to spend time with those we know and love...but tend to melt into a complete puddle in the presence of those we neither know nor love. And yet that theme—reaching out with brotherly, sisterly love—to friend and stranger alike, is one of the distinguishing marks of the teaching of Jesus. It would be wrong for me to pretend otherwise.

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It goes without saying...but I had best say it...it goes without saying that this morning's parable ends on a decidedly sombre note. Indeed! Those who helped to shape the Church's traditional understanding of hell—including the notion that once you're in, you're not getting out!...

...those Christian theologians who shaped what has been, for most of Christian history, the "majority perspective" on hell, were decisively shaped by the second half of this morning's parable. Father Abraham clearly informs the rich man that the bridge between the place where Lazarus now rests, and the place where the rich man now suffers torment, is a bridge no one can cross. And then, when the Rich Man tries to intercede on behalf of his brothers, Abraham offers a bleak counsel of despair: they have the Law, they have the Prophets, if

they haven't gotten the point through their encounter with those powerful testimonies, nothing we can do on our end is likely to help them. Case closed!

And yes: if you are anything like me, that whole dimension of this parable cannot help but send a bit of a chill down one's spine. I realize...I realize that no one in this room is wealthy by the world's standards. Some of us here are quite comfortable...that's true enough. But many here live on a fixed income...and have to watch every penny they spend. And yet: my gut tells me (especially when I survey how many people not only around the globe but right here in Canada have trouble putting a decent meal on their table)...

...when I survey the world in which I live, and contrast how much I have compared to the vast majority of those with whom I share this planet, I have a hard time not assuming that I would be cast as the "rich man" in this parable, rather than as Lazarus. And yes: given the severity with which this parable ends, that's not an easy thing with which to live. And since some of you...perhaps many of you...live with a similar anxiety...let me just say the following.

It is my conviction, strongly held, that this parable is steeped in irony. As a matter of fact, I'm tempted to go even further, and claim that this parable—much like the other parable in Luke 16, the Parable of the Dishonest Steward—I am tempted to claim that this parable is also one of the places in scripture in which we can faintly discern our Lord having a laugh at our expense. Because the bottom line, when I read this parable, is that the world of this parable is not identical to the world in which we live: that the reality depicted by this parable (thank God!), is not precisely the reality of the world God has made. And there are, I believe, two clues as to the difference between that world and our world!

First difference! In the parable, Father Abraham sternly tells the rich man that the bridge between the world of bliss occupied by Lazarus and the world of torment occupied by the rich man is a bridge that no one can cross. But we know that Christ—

...if you doubt this look this up in 1st Peter chapter 3 when you get home...

...we know that Christ descended into the eternal prison, in order to proclaim the Gospel. And so yes: that's one little thing that Father Abraham, in the world of the parable, has yet to learn. One little surprise awaiting Abraham! The other surprise being...

Well: the obvious surprise being that while the Abraham of the parable assures the Rich Man that it would be pointless for God to waste anyone's time sending someone back from the dead...that no one would have their heart moved by such a return...that those stuck in their selfish ways would not be reached even by so miraculous a turn....

Well: suffice it to say that we, gathered here this morning, know better than that. Know that we have heard rumours of a wisdom, a wonderfully foolish wisdom—that runs deeper than any we have yet to encounter....a wisdom that burst forth from the tomb on the third day with its promise of new light...new life...a new beginning...even for those who had lost all hope of ever seeing that light again.

This is the Gospel of the One who on the third day shattered the bonds of death and opened the gates of hell: the Gospel of the One who shatters the proud, but conspires to raise them up again!

This is the Gospel of Jesus Christ! Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ!