

A GREAT GULF

Luke 16:19-31

A Sermon by Robert E. Dunham

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 29, 2019

It is remarkable, if you think about it, but of all the parables of Jesus, the one Hannah Faye read for us is the only one in which a character is given a name. There are the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son, of course, but those are titles, not names. Here one of the characters is given a name, and even more remarkably, the one with a name in this story of a rich man and a poor man is the *poor* man. His name is Lazarus, which means “God helps.” Jesus does not name the rich man. In the late Middle Ages readers of the Latin Vulgate misunderstood the adjective *dives* (which means “rich”) as a proper name, and thus the parable became known as the parable of Lazarus and Dives, but the Greek does not allow the mistake.¹ The only one with a name is Lazarus. Says John Rollefson,

From Jesus’ perspective, Lazarus... although poor and hungry, is dignified with a name even though he is paid more attention by the dogs that lick his sores than by the generic [and anonymous] rich man. Lazarus in his evident need lay in plain sight as the rich man, “dressed in purple and fine linen, feasted sumptuously *every day*”.... We are meant to think of this as a repeated, even habitual encounter between rich man and poor man.

...Lazarus was part of the social landscape for this rich man, and below the notice of one who had the wherewithal to inhabit a home where the poor could be “gated” outside and kept at a distance.²

Such an understanding of the interplay between rich and poor echoes throughout Luke’s Gospel, as does the theme of the great reversal of fortunes that Jesus promises. His clear concern for the outsider and the poor “reverberates like a *basso continuo* throughout Luke’s Gospel.”³ Indeed, anyone who reads Luke half-awake is not shocked by the way this story ends. Jesus is unnervingly repetitive about the mortal risks the wealthy run. These repetitions are often invoked in the developing world among Christian communities of the poor as words of hope and encouragement. At the same time, they are words that used to make people of wealth and abundance squirm; at least, they make me squirm.

Some years ago, the *National Lampoon* carried a cartoon that was a spoof of an old Medici rose window from the Duomo in Florence, depicting a laughing camel leaping with ease through the eye of a needle. The caption beneath the cartoon read, “a recurring motif in works commissioned by the wealthier patrons of Renaissance religious art.” The Latin inscription on the window itself read “*Dives Vincet*,” which can be translated, “Wealth wins!”⁴

It would certainly seem to be true, if one looks around at the world today, just as it would have appeared to be true in the time of Jesus. But in his parable Jesus offers another perspective, a chilling reminder that in the vastness of God’s eternity, all our striving and all our acquiring ultimately may not be of very much help to us. In the second part of the parable both the rich man

¹ Ronald F. Hock, “Lazarus and Dives,” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary, Volume 4*, New York, Doubleday, 1992, 266-267.

² John Rollefson, “Eye of the Needle,” *Christian Century*, September 21, 2004, 20.

³ Rollefson, 20.

⁴ Rollefson.

and Lazarus die. But Jesus says that they end up in different places; Lazarus winds up being transported by the angels to the bosom of Abraham, while the rich man ends up in torment in Hades. Such a reversal is typical of the way Luke and indeed all the Gospels understand Jesus' teachings. But, says John Rollefson, the rich man doesn't get it. He sees Lazarus at a distance, and not recognizing the reversal that has happened, he still tries to use him to his advantage. He says, "Send that boy to dip the tip of his finger in the water and cool my tongue, for I am in agony."⁵ It is not an idle request; it betrays habits of control. His wherewithal is gone, but its stubborn residue remains.⁶ "Send that boy," he says. But Abraham gently refuses for Lazarus, noting, "There is a great gulf between us," and reminding the rich man that he had already received his reward.

That line, "a great gulf between us," pretty much says it all. That is where Jesus points us, it seems to me. Jesus describes a real world that is perhaps only a slight exaggeration of the world we know, a world of great chasms and gulfs, gulfs created by economic systems and by personal and political choices. Then, by the end of the story, Jesus is beckoning us toward the world which God intends.⁷

In the early 1830s Alexis de Tocqueville visited America and was struck by what he called "the general equality of condition among American people." Few were very rich, and few were terribly poor, and Tocqueville felt that that condition provided fertile soil for the development of a healthy democracy. Of course, I've been reading the *Times' 1619 Project*, and it's clear what Tocqueville missed. Even so, somewhere between then and now we changed. Today, one of the most notable aspects of American economics and arguably the most volatile aspect of common life as we go forward is the steadily growing gap between rich and poor.⁸

Now, let me be clear. This is not a pulpit broadside against *some* of us gathered here today. This problem is a problem in which we all participate, and it will take all of us to approach a solution. When I speak words that judge us, I preach first to myself. These words of Jesus call each of us and all of us here to account for the way we live vis-à-vis the poor of this world, for virtually all of us here are counted among the rich. I know not everyone would agree with that assessment; some would argue that among us there are those who are far more privileged, with far more wherewithal than others. That is true by degrees, but the fact remains: each of us has a roof over our heads at night, and we can eat whenever we are hungry. Those two facts alone separate us from the vast multitudes of the poor of the world... and thus separate us from the world that God intends.

More importantly, the parable itself does not cut us much slack. Deeds are done, it says, and lives are led, and there are consequences. People live their little passage of time in the world, they become what they become; and then they die, and then can only be changed by forgiveness and mercy.⁹ I pray for such mercy, though I do not find it readily accessible through this parable, which seems to speak only of the consequences.

⁵ Rollefson. The "send that boy" line is borrowed from Luke Timothy Johnson, in comments made to the January 1998 meeting of the Moveable Feast in Memphis, Tennessee.

⁶ J. Mary Luti, "Send Lazarus," *Christian Century*, September 9-16, 1998, 819.

⁷ William Willimon, "A Great Distance Between Us," sermon preached September 27, 1998 at Duke Chapel.

⁸ I owe to Willimon the reference to de Tocqueville and the distinction with present times.

⁹ Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow*, New York, Counterpoint Press, 2000, 158.

This parable is not just a morality play, though, in which things work out in a tidy way, with justice for the poor and punishment for the rich. Mark Harris suggests that Jesus is up to something more important here.

In this story we have the makings of a tragedy, and tragedy is closer to the truth of the gospel than any morality play. What is deeply troubling about tragedy is that it involves more than our individual will to action, or our intellects; it involves character flaws so grave that they permeate the actions of complete families and whole communities.

The rich man doesn't get it: it is not that he screwed up by not helping Lazarus while they were both alive; rather, it is that he could not hear, or did not listen to, Moses and the prophets, who had a lot to say about justice, the poor and those in need. [This rich man] had what Jesus in other contexts calls "hardness of heart" But nothing changes, even after death. . . . Indeed, Jesus makes it clear that the rich man does not understand, even in Hades. There he asks for mercy, but not forgiveness. He asks for water, but not life. . . .

As with any good tragedy the effect transfers to us, the audience. We see the tragic flaw in the rich man and recognize our own inability or unwillingness to hear and listen to God's word as it finds its way to us. [In it we] see our own hardness of heart. . . .¹⁰

This text comes around in the lectionary every three years at a time when most churches are beginning their stewardship emphases. Early in my ministry I thought that convergence was providential. The truth, however, is that this parable is a lousy stewardship text. Texts that make us feel guilty do not provide a very good foundation for stewardship, whose roots lie not in guilt, but in gratitude. No, what this text speaks to is our attitude toward the poor – and not only the poor, and I quote, "who can stand on their own two feet and who will not become a public charge."¹¹ This is a text that calls us to compassion and graciousness, to hospitality to the stranger, the alien, and the refugee, and a readiness to share what we have. And we know Jesus spoke within a community that commanded both individual and collective responsibility for such those in need. This parable is a clarion call to listen to what Moses and the prophets. . . and Jesus. . . have to say about community with one another.

The people who put together the lectionary linked this text to the one James read earlier in the service – Paul's counsel to Timothy about the "love of money" being the "root of all kinds of evil." And indeed, it is. But the early interpreters of the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus linked it with the epistle of James, and these words: "For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment" (James 2:13).¹² Perhaps the greatest "evil" that the love of money inflicts on us is the way it desensitizes us to the needs of others around us and robs us of compassion and mercy and concern in the larger communities in which we live.

A wise old friend once said, "We often think of wealth and poverty as opposites; but the truth is that they're synonyms, the antonym of which is community."¹³

¹⁰ Mark Harris, "No Way Out," *Christian Century*, Sept. 12-19, 2001, 18.

¹¹ A reference to Acting Director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Ken Cuccinelli's rephrasing of the Emma Lazarus poem on the Statue of Liberty, which he offered August 12, 2018.

¹² Luke Timothy Johnson made this point (cf. note 5), referring to the Patristic interpreters of Scripture.

¹³ The words were spoken by the renowned Baptist preacher Carlyle Marney.

In the end, the story of the rich man and Lazarus, as discomfoting as it is, has the power to redefine community for us. What is more, it has the power to redeem our lives. It has such power because it can enable us to see ourselves and our limited perspectives and choices more clearly, to recognize our complicity in the great inequities of our time, and to consider what it would mean truly to live in community with one another. It can also help us to see something else that is very important: that whenever our wealth and wherewithal shape the moral terrain and lead us to choose the terms of our compassion toward those we deem “less fortunate,” we might at least have the good sense to be a little uneasy, a bit embarrassed, perhaps... maybe even a bit ashamed. It does not mean we shouldn’t act, shouldn’t help. We will continue to extend our compassion, to set the terms and limits by which we will help, and to do what we think best, based on our limited perspectives, but it may be that this parable can help us to see that the best posture in which to begin to shape those perspectives... is on our knees.¹⁴

¹⁴ I paraphrase J. Mary Luti; cf. note 6.