

Luke 16:19-31

I

Ever since I learned that Luke 16 is the assigned reading for today, I've been trying to avoid preaching on it. A story about heaven and hell? My faith doesn't focus on the afterlife at all, much less fiery torment. I'm more of a "realized eschatology" kind of gal. I believe that it matters what we do now. That we should treat one another with dignity and respect because we should—because all persons are created in the image of God--not in order to insure that when we die we go up instead of down. A poor man resting in the bosom of Abraham up in the sky; a rich man writhing in torment down under the earth—this just seems a bit old-fashioned and unscientific. I mean, haven't we seen the images of space from Hubble?

If I'm honest, though, I probably have tried to avoid this story for another reason: it's scary. Because when I read this story, I instinctively identify with the rich man.

If I could identify with the poor man, I might like the story more. After years of suffering and starvation, he finally gets not only some relief but also justice!

But the poor man's story is not mine and I know it. I'm not rich (I work at a seminary, for heaven's sake) but I'm not poor. Not Lazarus-poor. This story scares me because it suggests that, like the rich man, my eternal fate might hinge on how I treated someone I never even noticed. I might face eternal torment, begging for a single drop of water, because of someone I didn't even know was there. And in this story, there are no do-overs. Not even a chance to help someone else avoid my fate.

In the blink of an eye, everything can be turned upside down and then it will be too late. The chasm that divides those suffering in hell and those resting in heaven will be uncrossable. The possibility of connection will be gone.

It's no wonder I was even tempted to preach on the Job text instead.

II

And yet, one of the things I have learned from spending so much time with the Bible is that our reactions to texts are worth paying attention to, because texts have a way of finding us, challenging us, especially in our resistance to them. And that if we stick with them, even run them through our scholarly paces, texts will always show themselves to be more rich than our first reactions to them reveal. They might even speak a word we need to hear.

So instead of running from this text, I've been studying it. Along with the students in the new BI100 class, I've been working through Luke for 5 weeks, trying to hear Luke's message by paying attention to how this book works.

What I've learned is that, in one way, reading all of Luke makes this story sound even harsher (if that is possible). Luke loves turning things upside down, inside out. Luke alone records the hymn of praise we call the Magnificat, in which Mary praises God for bringing down the powerful from their thrones and lifting up the lowly; filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty. Luke alone tells us of an outsider, a Samaritan, who saves others.

Throughout, Luke is pretty direct when talking about wealth. He tells people to sell their possessions and give alms. Only a few chapters before this one, Luke tells us of a rich man whose life ends suddenly one night. Jesus says he is a fool for storing up treasures on earth but not being rich toward God.

But I've also learned that Luke recognizes other realities, too. The work of a smart New Testament scholar (whose office is just downstairs) has reminded me that Luke also shows wealth being used to make the ministry of Jesus possible—it can feed, clothe, and support disciples and throw banquets where people come together and learn from one another's examples.

And, I've been reminded that, consistently, Luke is gospel of second chances. The gospel who gives us the rich man and Lazarus also tells us (in just the previous chapter) of the Prodigal, one who “was dead and was brought back to life, was lost but has been found.”

It is Luke that, over and over, reminds us that repentance is possible and sin can be forgiven: like the woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears, a sinner can experience a reversal as well and become a model of faith. In Luke, Jesus says that if someone sins seven times in a day and repents all 7 times, we must forgive. Surely God will do the same.

III

Reading all of this gospel of repentance has helped me notice in the passage things, or I should say, people that I didn't notice before. The rich man and the poor man aren't the only characters in this story with whom we might identify.

We aren't in heaven with the poor man or in Hades with the rich man—at least not yet. Rather we are in the situation of the rich man's brothers-- still living, our fates not yet sealed.

Here, in the middle, we like the brothers have the Law and the prophets. We have Scripture (like Luke), as well as the teaching of the church and the principles of human decency. We have all we need to know what the right thing is. We don't have to have someone return from the dead to tell us.

And like the brothers, we likely wouldn't be changed by a dramatic event anyway—at least not for very long. (We know this from our own experience. Every time something “big happens,” we say we'll change but we don't. After each tragedy of gun violence, we say we'll change the gun laws, but we don't. After the pope visits, we say we'll be better to the poor, but we aren't.)

No, the next big event isn't going to get us to repent. If we are going to change, we'll have to do it by paying more attention to what we already know.

And paying attention to who is in front of us. Luke doesn't criticize the rich man for not feeding the poor man. As Dr. Carey points out, what bothers Luke most is indifference--not even seeing each other. He says it this way: "Luke targets self-centered indifference even more insistently than direct exploitation." (52).

IV

And so it is that I've come to see in this passage, I see not only the flames of hell but also seeds of hope.

If we are in the role of the brothers, it's not too late for us. We can yet learn from the law and the prophets, and from this story which the Christian church in its wisdom linked with the Law and the Prophets of Israel's Scripture.

- In Luke's story, the uncrossable divide between the two men in death was a divide created in life, a divide that the brothers still have a chance to cross in order to see and know and care for their neighbors.
- Perhaps we too can still cross the boundaries between us and those we don't recognize as important enough to warrant our attention.
 - In Luke's story—both this episode and Luke's larger story--the one considered inferior turns out to be the source of salvation.
 - Perhaps those around us that we don't see can help us find our salvation.

Like the brothers, we can repent, receive God's forgiveness, and work to close the divides that separate us from one another. We can do that now, here, because, as Luke insists, God hears the cry of sinners and extravagantly forgives.

O God, have mercy on us sinners.