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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

September 25, 2022

Proper 21, Year C, Revised Common Lectionary

[Amos 6:1a,4-7](#)

[Psalm 146](#)

[1 Timothy 6:6-19](#)

[Luke 16:19-31](#)

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I remember a dream I had when I was maybe ten or twelve years old. I was waiting my turn for something that would decide the course of my eternal destiny. I would go to heaven or hell based on the outcome. As I got to the front of the line, I discovered I was standing below something like a huge bowl, the size of a big amphitheater, with my back to it. I was to hold a big heavy ball, something like a big billiard ball or croquet ball, and then toss it high up behind me to land in the bowl. It would land in a kind of maze where it would make its way to the bottom, something like a huge, cosmic version of the old Plinko game they used to play on the TV show *The Price is Right*. And wherever it ended up would determine my fate for all eternity.

I was angry in the dream, and appalled, and afraid. How could this one, most decisive choice be the product of something so completely random? It was unfair. It was scary. I got ready to toss the ball. And then I woke up and the dream was over.

Something about the intensity of that dream stayed with me to the point where it's one of the five or six dreams I remember from childhood. And I suppose it's no wonder. No matter what faith tradition or nonfaith tradition you grow up with, our culture exposes pretty much everyone to the idea that there might be a stark choice between heaven and hell, and that what you do in this life determines the outcome, so you'd better get it right. Probably many of us, maybe most, have spent some time at some point contemplating that possibility, and if we're honest, not without a degree of fear.

Our gospel passage from today has fed into some of that fear over the centuries. And maybe there's good in that, if that fear leads people to practice compassion before they die so as to try not to end up like the rich man, trapped in torment on the far side of an unbridgeable chasm. Yet I'm not sure this parable is meant to instruct us strictly about the precise arrangements we should expect in the afterlife so much as to confront us with what God's priorities are for us and who God desires to shape us into in this life.

Certainly if the parable is meant to teach us just how to get into heaven and stay out of hell, its instructions could be clearer. Neither Lazarus nor the rich man does anything conventionally Christian like get baptized or accept Jesus as their lord and savior. The rich man doesn't seem to do anything overtly evil: we're not told he cheated his way into his riches or kicked Lazarus as he walked by. His self-indulgent enjoyment of his riches and his ability to ignore the need of his neighbor seem to be enough to disqualify him. Nor does Lazarus do anything overtly good—actually in the entire parable he remains remarkably passive, with bad things happening to him on earth and then good things in the arms of Abraham.

There may be some comfort here in this parable for those who, like Lazarus, are oppressed and ignored. But it feels as though the intended audience is really those who can identify with the rich man. He's the one whose viewpoint the story follows and the one Abraham speaks with. He's the most fleshed-out character. And there are some things we can notice about him.

First, he hasn't completely failed to notice Lazarus during his life. We know that because when he sees Lazarus in heaven he knows his name. What's more, he has a very clear sense of Lazarus's role in life—or, should we say, of Lazarus's role in *his* life, the rich man's life. As he talks very politely to Abraham, the first thing he asks is that Abraham send Lazarus as an errand boy to ease the rich man's suffering by cooling his tongue with water. Lazarus is still the help in his mind. Even when Abraham reproves him and points out that Lazarus is now receiving his well-deserved reward, the rich man asks him *again* to send Lazarus on an errand, this time to go warn his brothers.

So the rich man's problem isn't that he was unaware of Lazarus. It's that he is all too aware, and not only failed to show Lazarus kindness, but actually fails to recognize him as a fellow human being with his own identity and story and autonomy. He sees him as a supporting character in his own story, someone whose only purpose is to serve.

Maybe you know the famous hymn "All Things Bright and Beautiful." We sometimes sing it for the Blessing of Animals at St. Francis Day. It's a lovely hymn if a little treacly-sweet: "each little flower that opens, each little bird that sings, he made their golden colors, he made their tiny wings." But there's a verse of the hymn that's not printed in our hymnals because pretty much no one sings it

anymore. The original verse 3 goes, “The rich man in his castle, the poor man at the gate, God made them high and lowly, and ordered their estate.” That hymn was written by Cecil Frances Alexander, an Anglican woman who was a member of the English upper class living in Ireland in the mid-1800s. By all accounts she was a devoted visitor of the sick and contributor to charitable causes. I don’t imagine that she is currently spending eternity in fiery torment. But I do believe she read the story about the rich man and Lazarus, wrote this hymn with it clearly in mind with the detail about the poor man at the gate, and completely missed the point of the parable, which is not that God creates some people to serve and others to be served and will make it all come right in the end, but that God is completely, eternally on the side of those who suffer unjustly and that when we build walls between ourselves and our neighbors, we find that what we have built instead is a chasm between us and God.

I said earlier that I don’t think this parable is meant to give us precise information about the configuration of the afterlife. And I’ll say that I’m not convinced there’s no hope for the rich man in this parable even still, though he may well have to spend many an age in his self-caused torment. After all, Abraham is still willing to at least speak with him. And even in this first conversation maybe there’s a glimmer of charity beginning to stir in his self-absorbed soul as his compassion extends at least to his brothers. It’s not much of a start, only those he already is close to, but it’s a small move beyond himself. And I wonder what will happen for this rich man when Holy Saturday comes around, when Jesus himself storms across the unbridgeable chasm, beats down the gates of Hades, and shows up looking for all the world like Lazarus. Will the rich man know him? Will we?