

Stories Jesus Told, Pt. 5
Lazarus and the Rich Man
Luke 16:19-31

**First Presbyterian Church
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We tell a lot of jokes with the structure of St. Peter and the pearly gates. Almost no one believes these represent a true picture of heaven. But we like them anyway. You know this one.

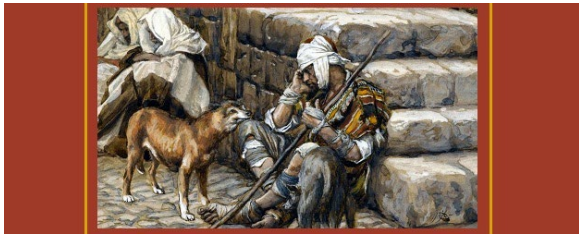
Three men die and go to heaven. St. Peter meets them at the pearly gates. He asks the first one, “Religion?” The man says, “Chapel on the Campus.” St. Peter looks down his list and says, “Good. Go to Room 24 but be very quiet as you pass Room 8.”

Another man arrives at the gates of heaven. “Religion?” “Christ Covenant on Lee Blvd.” “Excellent. Go to Room 18 but be very quiet as you pass Room 8.”

A third man arrives at the gates. “Religion?” “Sacred Heart on 22nd St.”

“Terrific. Go to Room 11 but be very quiet as you pass Room 8.” The man says, “I can understand there being different rooms for different denominations, but why must I be so quiet when I pass Room 8?” Peter tells him, “Well, the First Presbyterians are in Room 8, and they think they’re the only ones here.”¹

Hee-haw. Of course, you can insert any rival denomination in that final slot. The joke is on any and all of us who think our slice of the Christian pie is the only good slice. We get the point, but we don’t really think the story is the architecture of heaven.



I think that’s important to remember as we consider Jesus’ parable of the rich man and the poor man named Lazarus. There’s an important truth here. But I don’t think we were meant to build our cosmology of the afterlife on this story. If we get hung up on

the structure of Hades, the underworld, we will miss the point. This is a story that’s meant to reveal how earthly inaction has spiritual consequences.

Let’s look at the two men Jesus describes.

The rich man is simply described as dressing in fine clothes and feasting sumptuously every day. He’s a fashion hound. He likes to know the thread count in his Egyptian cotton pillowcases. And he’s a foodie. Every day calls for new

delicacies and a late party. He lives in a gated community. No one uninvited gets inside his door. It's a wonderful life. Filled with abundance, insulated from suffering, protected from undesirable people and circumstances. In just a few words, Jesus has given us a picture of abundance we grasp immediately. People would call this man blessed by God.

By contrast, the poor man is given a name. Lazarus comes from a Hebrew word that means "God has helped." No small irony here. Lazarus is disabled. His relatives laid him by the gate of the rich man. His lack of nutrition and hygiene had led to disease with symptoms of open sores. Lazarus could not fend off the scavenger dogs who came to lick his wounds. Ever hungry, Lazarus longed for bread scraps. The wealthy would use bread like a napkin, wiping the grease from their hands and tossing the oily crusts under the table. With just a few words, Jesus has given us a revolting image of poverty.

Without elaboration, Jesus says that both men soon die. Their status is instantly reversed. Lazarus reclines against the patriarch Abraham. The bosom of Abraham was a popular image for peace and repose. The rich man languishes in flames, parched for even a drop of water to relieve him.

We are not given an explanation as to why this reversal has occurred. The man who seemed to be favored now suffers isolation. The man who seemed abandoned and shamed is now happily resting with the greatest patriarch. Abraham states without explaining that re-balancing has occurred. "Child, remember that you in your lifetime received good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish." That's just the way it is. That's the way God's universe works.

We as listeners are immediately scrambling. How can this be? Isn't an eternity of suffering out of balance with a few decades of a rich life? Does a few years of being poor merit everlasting bliss? Before we get too far, though, we realize that this has been part of the message of Jesus in his most famous teaching. He said, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied." And in Luke's gospel, we get the other half of the sermon. "Woe to you who are rich, for you have your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry" (Lk. 6: 20-21, 24-25).

This is upside down thinking! It seems to contradict what our parents taught us and what we teach our children. Work hard. Do right. Things will go well. You

will get ahead and be blessed. This is a good and right life. God helps those who help themselves. Success is having the power to acquire, protect and take care of yourself and your loved ones. Isn't that right?

This also strikes my deep fears. I get keenly agitated when I feel trapped. That's why I don't go on cruises. There's no way off the boat. That's why running out of money terrifies me. I've seen the nursing homes of the poor. You're dependent. But neglected. Passive. Forgotten. Humiliated by your own incontinence. No agency. No resource. No power. No thanks! Is Jesus saying the only way to heaven goes through this helpless indignity?

Like the great teacher that he is, Jesus is not interested in giving us exit ramps from the discomfort of his story. He tells the parable and lets it stand. He means for us to squirm under his stark inflexibility. Now if I am brave, I let Jesus drive me to think more deeply about what he's saying.

The story peels back the layers of how I really see the world. Do I really believe there is more life after this life? I might say I do, but functionally I actually behave as if you only live once, so go for all you can get now. There's nothing more to come, so hold tight to whatever control, pleasure, power you have. Hoard the resources to alleviate your own suffering and that of your loved ones. It's all you can do in a brutal world.

Or maybe I have lost hope that God will indeed set all things right at the last. Maybe functionally I think I need to protect myself now, because I don't know if God really will keep me safe unto everlasting life. I don't know if justice will ever be done. My very anxiety about the economy and politics indicates that my hope in God's triumph can be very flimsy.

Or worse, maybe I have believed some lies. I have such a good life now because I am special. Other people aren't as special. I don't know why, but I am grateful. Of course, I work hard to show I deserve it. But the truth is, I feel a bit entitled. I feel like I'm always going to get away with it. It's just always going to be that way.

Where does that lead? It leads me to cling to the insulation of wealth. To ignore the great leveler that is death. I can pursue self-protection. I can disregard the exposure of my fragility, my secrets, my sins that death will inevitably bring. I can live in a fantasy world of distractions and delusions. The more money I have the more protection from reality I can buy.

And where does that lead? I don't open out to others. I don't look at my life as given to me in order to give it away in love. I don't see that sacrifice doesn't steal life from me, it gives life to me. Insulation leads to isolation which is death. But I'm so frightened to leave my self-protection that I almost stop believing the world was created by love and for love. I'm ignorant of 2000 years of Christian teaching that suffering can bring great good into our lives. Weakness leads to experiencing God's strength. Need connects me to grace. That's the truth but I don't want it. No thank you. Please, just give me some easy Bible answers so I can scrub away Jesus' parable and get back to my shows. Give me some theology that softens the edges and then leave me alone!



But the peril in the parable won't let me rest. Jesus won't walk back his words. He won't back-pedal these frightening conclusions. He will not leave me alone. He sends me in only one direction. He points to Lazarus at my gate. His silent gesture says one thing to me, "Go to him!" He points me to Lazarus in the arms of Abraham and says, "Do that! Go to him!"

Who are you talking about Jesus? He doesn't answer. He just lets me think about it. Who's at my gate? Who do I walk around? Who have I avoided so long that I forget they're even there? A neglected friend who doesn't give me as much as he used to? Someone who's no longer as useful to me, but who still loves me and needs me more than ever? Someone I might not ever pick to be my relative, but that God gave me to deal with the rest of my life? The neighbors I don't want to know but live a hundred yards from door for years? The person at work I tip toe past because I just can't stand to hear all about it again? The person I won't forgive? Or the one who won't forgive me? The discardable? The obnoxious? The deconstructed ex believer? The lost?

Is it bigger than an individual? Is it the neighborhoods I drive past but never through because if I saw it I would be so troubled? The 25% of my fellow citizens that live below the poverty line? The 1500 people who received services following being sexually trafficked in Louisiana? The children who don't get fed enough when school is out? Teenagers who feel ugly or anxious or hopeless? The widows and single parents? The homebound and the fired? Jesus just keeps pointing to Lazarus in the arms of Abraham. He calls us to the same. "Go to him," is all he says.

And if we get what's he saying, we also know how, no matter our wealth or place or pride, we are also Lazarus. We are as helpless before mortality as any broken, impoverished, notorious, or addicted sinner. We know that not all our insulation can keep us safe. Not all our self-protection can prevent the great leveler from taking us away. We'd better have another plan.

It all starts today at the table. Captains of industry and people without a home will come to this table. The doctorates and the dropouts will arrive here. Those with means to feast at the finest places on earth will come here as beggars at the gate. Just a scrap of bread from this table is beyond our deserving. But we will, with all pride shattered, make brave to ask. Here at this table, we are all one. We all take the role of Lazarus. Not worth the King's attention except that his name is Love. Not presentable in our rags with our sores oozing and showing, except that he has clothes of grace and healing ointments of mercy awaiting. We cannot charm him, cajole him, demand from him or connive his favors. We only trust that his words are true and meant for us: Come to me. Come to me all who thirst. Come buy what you need without money.

He will feed you. But there is one condition laid on us by this parable. This is the form that faith and repentance must take. Come to me if, and only if, you are willing to be sent by me. Come if you will go to the Lazarus I lay at your door.

¹ Among many places: <https://goodfaithmedia.org/the-jokes-on-them-denominations-in-heaven-cms-16832/>