

*Seriously?* (31Mar19) Luke 16:19-31

Going on vacation doesn't vacate you from my thoughts. I continue to think about work, to pray for your concerns, to have you on my mind nearly as much as when I'm here. Maybe somebody would say that's wrong or not healthy, but that's how I am and how I serve as your pastor. I can't and don't want to get away from that, to vacate you.

This Bible reading was also on my mind while I was away. Another time, I had been in Utah National Parks and the Badlands and got to reflect on them when I came back. That was much preferable to this, where my association on vacation was maybe most directly in a poor somber woman who appeared to be Native American, standing like so many others in Albuquerque at a stoplight with a sign. Hers said, "I hope you will have a good day." Acacia reached out our car window and gave her one of our granola bars.

This is not a very easy reading to carry around these weeks, both hefty and risky. It indicts me. A question that feels like it matters most is: how seriously do we take this?

It could be read as a direct description: two men died and Jesus describes what happened to them.

Beyond that, it can be taken literally to be telling what it is like afterdeath, in the afterlife, the two places a person can go, or maybe be sent, for the rest of eternity, one apparently a place of tender comfort and security and community and the other of awful abandonment and pain and burning.

Though neither of these places have the familiar names but are instead called the bosom of Abraham and Hades, still we probably have already put them into our standard mental framework of heaven and hell.

There we might already have a first breakdown in how seriously we take this. I suspect we wouldn't find this sentiment much at play here. I'd be surprised if we had many takers on judgment condemning to a hell of everlasting

punishment. Some may have decided against anything beyond this life at all. The keenness, I know, isn't for my proclamation of God's final victory in the endtimes resurrection to life in a renewed creation in this world. I would suspect the most typical thought would be that we all go to heaven when we die.

That might begin to move us from theological topography to moral mapmaking. We want to take out of this story not a predestined, predetermined outcome of *where* people end up, but *how* you get where you want to go. If this story is not only describing the fate and locale of two men, but holds potential meaning for adjusting your trajectory, you might be eager to know what you have to do to get where you want to go.

In spite of presumptions of people going to heaven when they die, even so it winds up twisted with ethics: that you have to be a good person, right? In facing death, we seem mostly in that camp, looking back assessing a life well-lived, recounting good done. That may serve as satisfaction for passing muster and accounting well on a tally sheet.

That also shows we're far from times where pure belief had bearing on that. Though plenty of billboards on my trip asserted the need to accept Jesus and call on his name, taking this story seriously doesn't include that, does it? The central requirement has moved from *orthodoxy* to *orthopraxy*, from believing rightly to acting rightly, not that a person was in the right religious denomination or believed the right things or had spiritual practices to get to heaven. There's nothing here about worship attendance or devotion to God. If you came here to prove that and score points, I guess you can set it aside.

Maybe instead you set yourself to earn it by being a good person, however you'd usually define that. A next step in taking the story seriously involves categorizing ourselves. I'd suspect many of us by comparison relate more to the rich man than poor Lazarus. So by this parable, a definition of being good might relate to sharing, that if you have more, you should give

some way. Maybe we extrapolate that the rich one could've invited Lazarus to supper or something.

If we're counting our good actions, I can remind you that this week we send out first quarter benevolence checks. Besides the good here, 15% of all the money you give gets redistributed to support the mission of the church and do larger good, especially for Lazaruses most in need. This does a bit to help immigrants, the homeless, those with mental illnesses, those in jail and those getting out of jail, the elderly, those facing disasters, the hungry, historically marginalized people, hurting creatures, people in desperate poverty of all sorts, and more. Besides the other ways that you try to help, to be a good person, try to remedy the plight of the poor, to do your part in working for a solution, your offering dollars strive for this good.

But this isn't just feel-good. We must be aware we can always do more. Yet in assessing or placing ourselves, we should also realize that in our current American situation, almost none of us is the rich man. To rank our standing, it's really easy to hear this being a story about Jeff Bezos or Donald Trump or hedge fund billionaires with private jets. We can readily point out that they're doing it wrong, that their wealth is blinding them to the reality of the world, that they shouldn't be so selfish. And that very accurately and honestly is the problem. When the richest 1% own more than the lowest 80%, that is a problem. That is wrong. There is no way to call this a Christian nation when that sort of inequality grows further and further entrenched, when even the so-called middle class becomes Lazarus, when the superrich don't just ignore Lazarus but actively and every day make life more impossible for him, for her, for us.

So we should notice this is systemic. It has to change, or it won't matter how good we try to be. As we keep trying to stretch our incomes and as belts get tighter and tighter for almost everybody, we have less discretionary income. We end up struggling to feed ourselves, to afford our own houses, to take care of our own families, much

less having anything to give away. That is a worsening truth.

We're largely shielded from it here, but churches clearly are among those suffering. Churches are having to close their doors—not just to the good they wanted to offer communities but to shut down totally—because members couldn't afford to pay a pastor, to keep things running. That isn't only from declining attendance, but also about wealth inequality and available personal resources and when it's difficult to live.

So as the church encountering this story at this point in history, we have to consider radical redistribution of wealth. We have to be part of working against systemic injustices. This can involve lobbying and taxes and global solidarity.

But continuing to take this story seriously isn't just hard big picture anti-imperial finance. It's also about Lazarus. The rich man knew Lazarus, knows him by name! This has a human face on it. It's not only about changing systems. It's not only about supporting organizations. As they say: this time...it's personal.

If we take it seriously, this is about your relationships, or relationships you should have. It's about working across divisions of economic disparities. In the smallest way, it's handing a granola bar to the woman in New Mexico. Better would be not to drive on but to interrupt my vacation plans to get to know her. Or maybe I shouldn't go on vacation at all, since I also have the sense of knowing right here in our midst people who need help, help I and we can offer, with whom I should be in relationship, where this story might be making demands of me.

Again, though, the story might not be. I don't say that to let myself off the hook or avoid my shame or guilt, but to keep taking the story seriously. See, the ethical insistence seems a little lacking. It's not so basic as a lesson in sharing or a warning. It doesn't have the directive Jesus later gives that following him involves selling everything and giving the money to the poor.

Mostly this portrays simple reversals. One who had plenty of good is left with not good, and one who lacked almost everything is finally and

forever treated to the good. We're not either haves or have-nots, but have-nows or have-laters. That's something, but not that great of a resolution for the meantime. It has been used as pie in the sky pathetic pious assurances for those who have been left out: life may not be great but it'll be better later. You just need to die first! That doesn't sound like a fun wait.

But in the story, that reversal is all there is. It says the rich won't change, won't listen. I don't know exactly what to do with that, but that's taking the story seriously. There's no point in lecturing you to try harder, to share more, because it won't convince you anyway. Even if one were raised from the dead and Jesus could be here now in these very words I'm speaking, it wouldn't matter, wouldn't make a difference. I don't say that for resignation to let things stay the way they are. It makes me sad, even about myself. But maybe he says it that way because it's accurate.

So in the end, all there is is to keep repeating the message. With or without your assistance, you have a God who favors those in need, who knows and calls them by name, who strives for them and embraces them, has a preferential option for the poor. This isn't a new story, isn't a surprise we hear today. It is the same God from the beginning of the Bible to the end, throughout history. Jesus' first words in this Gospel declared "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because she has anointed me to bring good news to the poor." His first beatitude was "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled." His mother sang before his birthday of God who "fills the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty."

Whether you take it with the mystical vision of the bosom of Abraham today or take it with the modern economic statistical analyses of revolutions for those who got excluded and forced to eke out a living, this is the ongoing proclamation that God will leave nobody out, that all shall see salvation, that this good news cannot be hoarded, that it especially seeks out those who need it most. That's what Jesus is up to. That's

what God's Spirit is still doing here and now, with or without us. That's the big picture for eternity, and the personal importance for you.

But you already knew that, so you can do with it what you want.