

Luke 16:19-31

16:19 "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day.

16:20 And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores,

16:21 who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores.

16:22 The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried.

16:23 In Hades, where he was being tormented, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side.

16:24 He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in agony in these flames.'

16:25 But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things and Lazarus in like manner evil things, but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony.

16:26 Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.'

16:27 He said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house—

16:28 for I have five brothers--that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.'

16:29 Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.'

16:30 He said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.'

16:31 He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"

Sermon: Why Must It Be Laz or Us?

The Exodus story of manna in the wilderness is a recurring theme in our sacred scriptures. It is a fascinating story.

Israel escapes the mighty Pharaoh of Egypt, and witnesses the parting of the Red Sea, only to find itself wandering in desolate wilderness. God provides bread in the form of flaky manna. I don't know about you, but I always imagine manna to be like if you could use an apple peeler on a Krispy Kreme doughnut. Just all these flakes of sticky goodness. There is but one stipulation. Eat your fill – *enough* – but no more.

I like to imagine the initial contentedness of that first meal of manna. Anxious nerves are soothed. Growling bellies are satisfied. And for a fleeting moment, an entire community has all it needs: daily bread, rest for tomorrow, safe space for the present. We often talk about the miracle of Jesus feeding the thousands, and we imagine everyone satisfied along the hillside. This is the miracle of feeding the millions, day after day, on flat, hard dirt, void of gentle slopes and grassy plains.

The manna party won't last. As the first day nears its end, the anxiety of the people resumes. They watched God fell Pharaoh, and yet one can never be too prepared – perhaps we should save a little extra bread for tomorrow. It's one thing for God to do the miraculous now and again, to be the provider now and again, but it's quite another to believe that God will do so all time. Some of God's people insist on hoarding manna that will be rotten the next day.

The Pentateuch is the story of God's invitation into a covenant with God's people: participation in an economy of enough-ness. The stories that follow, ours included, reflect the tension created by a world that insists on a different form of covenant: economies driven toward creating more resources for a few of us, and less resources for most of us.

This week, we engage another of Luke's parables, and once again, it's meaning is not as straightforward as you might think.

We've got a rich man, and a poor man. We've got an afterlife of eternal blessings and eternal woes. And if we read our text in a hurry, we've also got a Joe Friday, just-the-facts-Ma'am, rendering of justice. The greedy ultimately suffer. The impoverished ultimately find blessings. And yessir, you are correct, there's a fixed window of time to get it right, and yes, you heard that correctly, there's only so many proclamations to be heard. Don't miss the deadline. Unclog your ears!

Frankly, I believe a straightforward reading of this text is a lot to ask. Such a reading requires us to believe that every person with wealth is immoral, and every person without wealth is moral. We're asked to believe in a rigid, time-stamped grace that doesn't feel very graceful.

And I believe we're asked to limit our sphere of theological thinking and living to the economic realm.

So...I re-read our text. Slowly. And again. And a few times more.

Here's the verse that keeps catching my attention:

Besides all this, ***between you and us a great chasm has been fixed***, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us. (Luke 16:26).

It's not that the rich man's wealth puts him in his eternal predicament. It's that the rich man allows his pursuit of wealth to create a permanent chasm between him and God.

He's so blinded by wealth, or perhaps SO full from his sumptuous feast, that he can only see the poor man Lazarus with indifference, if in fact, he even sees him at all. Lazarus isn't around the corner. Lazarus sits, and daily, at his gate, his front doorstep. And Lazarus experiences impoverishment as deeply and as publicly as the rich man experiences contentment.

The rich man doesn't equate the value of his neighbors in their createdness as God's children, but rather in their economic status. And let's not forget that he's a subpar patron – even amid the gluttony of Rome, the wealthy had a responsibility to look after the less fortunate. Here is one who acquires and disposes.

The chasm continues in the next realm. The rich man, even in an other-worldly dimension, barks out orders. Have Lazarus bring me some water. Upon learning there's no relief for himself, he insists that

someone tell his five brothers so that they can avoid the same fate. But again, there is a chasm. He's really seeking to maintain a sense of control by ensuring the system is perpetuated by those who share his privileged status.

Morning manna is a metaphor for God's covenant being realized by God's people. God's people, God's lands, and God's creations live in accordance with God's intention – there is enough for everyone to have enough and be enough.

Rotten, hoarded, spoiled manna is a metaphor for those who live like the rich man. The greed comes at the expense of neighbor. And the surplus has no ability to offer long-term satisfaction.

I don't believe this morning's parable is an ultimatum or a warning about the short fuse of God. I really do believe that God offers infinite opportunities for reconciliation – I believe the threshold of God's grace is beyond our comprehension of time, patience, and imagination. In other words, God is always extending us a hand of welcome and hospitality, even when we act like a lousy patron.

I believe what this parable is working to get across is that if we choose to be bound up in the covenants of systems rather than the covenant of enough-ness, it's gonna be nearly impossible to unclog our ears, even if the message is delivered by the walking dead. In other words, if we can't see God in the face of Lazarus, if we can't hear his cry as a plea for liberation, if we refuse to process and value an economy of dignity and respect from all neighbors, it's gonna be hard to remove that chasm. I am grateful for parables that mention other dimensions, particularly because they help remind us of something very important: we live in this dimension. In this time. In this space. Right here and now. In the

present. We don't live in the hyperbole and imagination of stories, though they do reveal vital truths.

And here, here, right here in this dimension, we have the opportunity to remove those chasms that prevent our connectedness with God. We can hear Moses. We can hear the prophets. We can hear and see one another, and more importantly, we can choose to love one another.

In the Exodus story, Pharaoh's heart is so hardened he cannot overcome the chasm of his anger. Shouldn't ours be a community that empathizes with one another, that works hard to resolve conflict and discontent before they fester into stubborn anger?

In this morning's story, the rich man is so focused on wealth, he cannot overcome the chasm of greed. He was good at acquiring things. But what happens when those things cannot offer affirmation, cannot quell the pangs of loneliness or lifelessness?

What of our own stories? Do we carry a sense of grief or anxiety that is SO big we cannot empathize with the similar experiences of our neighbors? Do we face the kind of traumas, real or perceived, that invite us to step over, or drive on past Lazarus when he cries out to us, because we've got our own needs to meet? Do we spend so much time analyzing what really is enough – emotionally, physically, spiritually – that we can no longer recognize *enough* when we receive it? How often do we worship at the altar of convenience? Sure, we know there's manna, but why wait till morning when you can get your fill tonight? They'll even deliver it to your door for a small service fee! There's a rich man, dressed in purple, eating his fill till his heart's content. There's a poor man, dressed in rags, and empty in every

possible way. God's world is not about choosing or becoming one or the other.

God's world is about creating a table where both men (not to mention you and me, too!) have a place to sit, and bread to eat, and rest for tomorrow, and space to live in community, to live into our intended purpose.

Good friends, we must identify those chasms in our own lives that clog our ears and blind our eyes to the receipt of morning manna.

And listen, I know it's hard right now. Really hard. Ours is a nation where in every generation, in every administration, our leaders have struggled with the chasm of common sense. That's normal. That's human. That's actually a good thing. Would that we could live again in a world where we criticized our leaders like we criticize our football coaches, not questioning their basic humanity (because it's not really question!), just questioning their command of basic Xs and Os.

But something has changed. Nearly every national institution we hold dear from the cultural, to the political, to the economic, to the social, is struggling to overcome the chasms of ideology, of deeply embedded racism, classism, and sexism, of flat-out greed and immorality. We are normalizing a grotesque hyperbole of indecency. That chasm, I think, that existed for the rich man in our story, was partly the idea that we, at our core, both as individuals and community, have safeguards from traveling to the worst parts of ourselves. But lately, we've built a bridge, a highway, direct access to that space. And it's not that one specific person has led us to this point. We have, collectively, excused the actions of the rich man, while simultaneously ignoring the needs of

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Lazarus. And again, I say, we needn't, we mustn't live in this hyperbole any longer. Not one second longer. People of faith, hear this:

There was a community. They didn't live in a parable. They live right now. How will they see one another? How will they hear one another? How will they love one another? What chasms will they cross over together?

Perhaps the Kin-dom of Heaven is like a group of church buddies who seek to ask the important questions, and discover the answers together, especially those answers that provoke more questions, that bring sight to see the neighbors right in front of us.

May it ever be so!

Amen.