

Jesus told the following parable to some political and religious leaders who loved money more than God. (See Luke 6:14-15)

Luke 16:19-31

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. 20 And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, 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. 22 The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. 23 In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. 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.’ 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. 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.’ 27 He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house— 28 for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ 29 Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ 30 He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ 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.’”

A PARABLE OF JUDGMENT

In our Bible study this week someone said, “I find this parable to be absolutely horrifying.”

I can understand her feeling. I much prefer parables like the parable of the Good Samaritan or the parable of the Prodigal Son. I like parables that put the emphasis on unexpected grace and salvation.

But, today’s parable goes in a different direction. Today’s parable is a parable of unexpected judgment.

Those of you who have worshipped with us for a while know my oversimplified definition of a parable. A parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. But, today’s lesson reverses that pattern.

Today's lesson is a "heavenly story" with an earthly meaning. In today's lesson we are transported to the place of salvation and judgment, heaven and hell. And the religious leaders, the Pharisees learn a surprising lesson.

In God's kingdom there can be a great reversal. Sometimes those who were tormented in this life are comforted. And sometimes those who had a good life on earth are tormented.

There are several things that we need to keep in mind as we interpret this passage.

First and foremost we need to remember that this is a parable. It's a story designed to teach a lesson about the kingdom of God. We must take it seriously, but we must not take it literally.

If we took this passage as a literal description of heaven and hell, we would do an injustice to the plain meaning of the text. It is a parable, a made up story to make a point.

Different forms of literature can teach us the truth. But, they teach us that truth in different ways. For example, when Carl Sandburg says that the fog comes "on little cat's feet" we don't take that literally.

But, we know what he means. In fact I find that poem to be a wonderful description of how fog silently transforms the landscape and then "moves on."

THE CONSEQUENCES OF GREED

The parable that we study today is a powerful lesson about the consequences of greed. When we love money and things more than we love God, it does something bad to us. The Bible tells us "the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil." (1 Timothy 6:10)

And today's lesson is about a particular kind of evil, the love money disguised as faith. According to Jesus the road to perdition is paved with greed disguised as faith.

The insidious thing about the evil of greed is that we can see it in everyone else, but we can't see it in our own lives. We sometimes think that we get what we "deserve" in life. And if we are successful, we sometimes attribute that success to our righteous behavior.

That's why the Pharisees made fun of Jesus when Jesus said that you couldn't love God and money. They thought the fact that they were well off proved that God was on their side.

If people were poor it was their own fault. They didn't work hard. They didn't have the right theology. If people suffered, it was because they had displeased God in some way

This was a common belief in Jesus' day. Unfortunately, that's still a common belief in our day.

Those silly prosperity preachers say, "If you're a child of God, then God wants you to look the part. He wants you to dress in designer clothes, live in a big house and drive a fancy car."

And believe me, these preachers practice what they preach.

But, the Bible does not teach a one to one correspondence between wealth and righteousness nor does it teach a one to one correspondence between poverty and sin. The world is more complex than that, and the Bible recognizes that complexity.

WHO SINNED?

You may remember a time when Jesus and his disciples came across a man born blind. The disciples asked Jesus, "Who sinned, the man or his parents?"

You see people believed that misfortune in life occurred because somebody had done something wrong and God was punishing them. But, the man born blind posed a conundrum. How could he be punished before he had even done anything? The disciples suggested that maybe his parents had done something wrong.

But, Jesus responded by saying that things aren't that simple. It's not up to us to judge why people have trouble. Instead, people in distress give us an opportunity to demonstrate the grace and love of God.

And with that, Jesus healed the man.

But, the miraculous healing of a man born blind did not convince the religious leaders that Jesus was who he said he was. Instead they put the man who had been healed on trial and eventually they cast him out of the synagogue.

The privileged are often blind to the weaknesses in their self-serving theology. And they will stop at nothing to silence the voices of the oppressed (John 9:1-41)

And maybe that's why today's parable is so harsh.

A GREAT CHASM

Jesus is trying to wake up these blind religious and political leaders. He is trying to help them see their own faults through the story of another man's misery. He does this not because he hates them but because he loves them.

And Jesus tells this parable to us for the same reason. This powerful story about heaven and hell helps us look at the world through the lens of God's Word instead of the lens of those who make commercials.

There is a great contrast in this story. The two men in our story couldn't be more different.

The rich man dresses in purple and fine linen. The poor man is covered with sores.

The rich man has a feast every night. The poor man has nothing to eat and longs for the crumbs that fall from the rich man's table.

Both men die. And surprisingly the roles are reversed.

The poor man is comforted in the bosom of Abraham. And the rich man is in torment. When the rich man asks Abraham to send the poor man, Lazarus to assuage his thirst with a drop of water, Abraham responds by saying that he can't do that. There is "a great chasm has been fixed between them." There is no way to get there from here.

That phrase, "a great chasm" caught my attention. When you think about it, there was always a great chasm between the rich man and the poor man, in heaven and on earth.

And the big question asked by this parable is this: How do we bridge that gap?

How do we learn to care for the poor beggar at our gate and even those poor souls who live farther away?

What will it take to wake us up?

MOSES AND THE PROPHETS

In the parable the rich man asks Abraham to warn his five brothers. He said, “Send Lazarus back to warn them. If they see someone who has come back from the dead, then they will believe. Please, don’t let them come to this place of torment.”

The rich man is not completely hardhearted and selfish. He pleads with Abraham on behalf of his family. But, Abraham replies, “They have Moses and the prophets. They should listen to them.”

This is the heart of the parable. What does it mean to listen to Moses and the prophets?

It is possible to read Moses and the prophets (the Bible) in many different ways. The Pharisees would say,

“We’re following the law. Just read Deuteronomy 28. It says, ‘If you will obey the Lord your God ... these blessings will come upon you.’” And the verses that follow detail those blessings: the blossoming prosperity of the city and the countryside, an abundance of crops and an increase of cattle and flocks.” And the rest of that chapter is filled with curses, curses that will come upon those who do not obey God. These curses are the direct reversals of the blessings: devastation and destruction, pestilence and plague, and there is one other curse that particularly relevant to our lesson for today.

In Deuteronomy 32:5 we read,
 “The Lord will strike you on the knees and on the legs with grievous boils of which you cannot be healed, from the sole of your foot to the crown of your head.”

Does that sound familiar?

It sounds a lot like the poor man, Lazarus, who was covered with sores and the dogs would come and lick his sores.

Jesus is calling attention to this detail. Lazarus looks exactly like the one who is cursed by God.

And so according to one interpretation of the Scripture, the man’s state is his own fault.

He must have disobeyed God in some way and so the rich man has no obligation to care for the poor man at his gate.

THE WHOLE STORY

This story also reminds me of a similar story in the Old Testament, the story of Job. Job lost everything, his family, his wealth, and finally he was covered with sores from head to toe.

Job's friends saw this as a sign of God's curse. And they told Job to think real hard about what he had done. Why had God cursed him? They said Job should come clean. He should repent and perhaps God would relent.

But, Job had not done anything to deserve his fate, and neither had the poor man, Lazarus.

All our interpretations of the Bible must take into account the whole story of the Bible. Theology must not be constructed on just a few favorite verses.

Jesus knew that the book of Deuteronomy also said, "You shall open your hand to your brothers and sisters, to the needy and to the poor ..." (Deuteronomy 15:7-11)

And this was not an isolated command. Throughout Scripture we hear a strong and steady drumbeat of concern for the poor, the widow and the foreigner who has come to live in their country.

For example, the prophet Isaiah wrote that God's people should share their bread with the hungry, and give the homeless a home. (Isaiah 58:6-7)

Interpreting the Bible can be very difficult.

It is difficult because we have to overcome cultural and language barriers. It is difficult because we need to pay attention to context and the form of the passage. We have to ask is this passage a poem, a hymn, a parable or prose?

But, the most difficult thing about biblical interpretation is learning to listen to the whole of Scripture, especially those verses that challenge our cherished beliefs.

Sometimes people are punished for things that they have done wrong. But, innocent people are sometimes caught up in a situation that prevents them from being all that they could be.

Poverty is not necessarily a sign of disobedience and wealth is not necessarily a sign of faithfulness. It's more complex than that. We can't judge. Only God can judge.

WE ARE THE BROTHERS

So why did Jesus tell this parable to the religious leaders? Why did he tell this parable to us? Did he just want to scare us and make us feel guilty?

I don't think so. Jesus told this heavenly story so that we might change our earthly lives.

The nice thing about a parable is that we can rewrite the ending. And God wants us to rewrite the ending.

How we interpret a parable depends upon with whom we identify with. Many of us might identify with the rich man who did nothing for the poor man at his gate. In that case we would feel guilty and maybe even a bit afraid.

Others of us are having such a hard time in life that we identify with the poor man covered with misery. We might take comfort in the fact that one day in heaven things might be better for us.

But, I would suggest that we not identify with the poor man or the rich man. Instead, I would suggest that we identify with the 5 brothers of the rich man who still had a chance to change. They could still learn to correctly interpret the Law and the Prophets. They could still change in response to the demands of God's Kingdom.

Abraham told the tormented rich man that if folks didn't listen to Moses and the prophets then they wouldn't listen even if someone would rise from the dead.

In some cases that was true. Some still rejected the risen Christ. Some still could not believe. Resurrection was not an event that brought joy but an event that brought fear.

But, some did believe, and that changed the way they lived.

THE SALT OF THE EARTH

Jesus doesn't want us to be afraid. Jesus wants us to be the salt of the earth. Jesus wants us to bring kingdom ethics to bear in the world.

Those of us who are people of the Kingdom are called to look at things differently. We see sharing who we are and what we have as a way of life.

The book of Acts tells us that the early church was distinguished by the fact that they shared what they had with each other. The rich shared with the poor. They ate together. They worshipped together.

It wasn't a perfect community, but this new way of life was shockingly different in the ancient world.

And people were attracted to this community. The church grew like wildfire.

I think people would still be attracted to a community based upon compassion and grace. I think people would still be attracted to a community where people share and tell about a God who is not out to get us but who is out to save us.

We need to be careful when we read a passage like this. If we took it out of context, we could paint a picture of a God who is very judgmental.

BUILDING BRIDGES

But, this is not the God revealed in Jesus. The God revealed in Jesus enters Jerusalem for the last time. Jesus knows that people he loves will kill him. And Jesus cries,

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!

How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (Luke 13:34)

Are we willing to be gathered under the wings of grace?

Are we willing to love God and neighbor? Are we willing to start building bridges between the poor and the rich instead of making the chasm bigger?

We can't do everything, but we can do something.

I'm proud of this church for doing something. We feed the poor at Daily Meal. We have a food pantry. We collect 2 cents a meal for hunger related programs.

I know. It's not enough. It's not nearly enough.

But, we believe that in God's hands no gift is insignificant. Even a cup of water given in God's name can make a difference. (Mark 9:41)

Today's lesson teaches us that we begin at our doorstep. When we care for the neighbor nearest us, things change in ways we can scarcely imagine.

Amen.