

The Great Turnaround

Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple wrote, “The world, as we live in it, is like a shop window into which some mischievous person has got overnight, and shifted all the price-labels so that the cheap things have the high-price labels on them, and the really precious things are priced low. We let ourselves be taken in. Repentance means getting those price-labels back in the right place.” Our gospel reading – the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man – gets to the truth of what the archbishop was talking about. Rather than being a celebration of poverty and a denouncing of wealth, this famous story of Jesus is actually a warning about right values and how God expects us to show them in this life before death and its consequences overtake us. Let’s take a closer look at the details and learn some lessons for our Christian life.

Jesus begins by telling about “a certain rich man who was splendidly clothed in purple and fine linen and who lived each day in luxury.” (Luke 16:19) Being dressed in expensive garments and having the best food available were only parts of the rich man’s world, separated from the harsh realities of everyone else by a walled compound with a gate. Just outside the entrance was a beggar, “a poor man named Lazarus who was covered with sores. As Lazarus lay there longing for scraps from the rich man’s table, the dogs would come and lick his open sores.” (Luke 16:20-21) A picture of utter degradation and destitution in such close proximity to great wealth. Lazarus was very sick and malnourished, with no one to help him except the neighborhood dogs that came along to clean his wounds. How was it that the rich man hadn’t noticed him as left his property and returned each day? Or had he noticed and chosen not to respond, much like the priest and the Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan?

Recall that Jesus was speaking these parables to a group of Pharisees, “who dearly loved their money and scoffed at him. Then he said to them, ‘You like to appear righteous in public,

but God knows your hearts. What this world honors is detestable in the sight of God.” (Luke 16:14-15) The Pharisees’ theology, derived from their interpretation of the law of Moses, saw wealth as a sign of God’s favor and poverty as evidence of God’s displeasure. Jesus turned this idea around by continually showing God’s care and concern for the poor and needy, and that those with means needed to share and take responsibility for seeing that justice for the oppressed was done. It wouldn’t have been too hard for the Pharisees to see themselves in this parable as the rich man who ignored the plight of people like Lazarus, feeling that it was somehow his own fault that he was in such a situation, that God had abandoned him to a hard and difficult earthly life. Like the rich man, the Pharisees clung to their wealth, power and social position, in contrast to the poor beggar who had no house, money or health. His empty hands gratefully received God’s grace; the rich man’s full hands “needed nothing.”

At the height of his fame as a boxer, Muhammed Ali was approached by a flight attendant who asked him to put his seatbelt on before take-off. Ali refused. He stood up and proudly said, “I’m Superman, and Superman don’t need no seat belt!” The attendant answered, “And Superman don’t need no plane, neither!”

What a turnaround in the second part of the parable! Both of the men die, but their fortunes are reversed. Lazarus now enjoys the comforts and security of “Abraham’s bosom”, while the rich man suffers separation from the good things he enjoyed. Yet, his attitude stays the same – condescending, arrogant and demanding. “Father Abraham, have some pity! Send Lazarus over here to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue. I am in anguish in these flames.” (Luke 16:24) Lazarus is still looked on, not as a brother, but as an errand-boy to

do the will of the rich man. His focus is still totally on himself, to restoring the comfort he had in his physical life, feeling he deserves special treatment.

Abraham's response was a comparison of the conditions of life, in the past and the present, and how they've been switched for each man. "Besides, there is a great chasm separating us. No one can cross over to you from here, and no one can cross over to us from there." (Luke 16:26) Not much different from the "great chasm" that separates poverty from riches experienced by many today as it was in the time of Jesus. As well, the chasm that separates our response to seeing poverty and doing something about it is as real now as for the rich man then. There are still many 'Lazarus figures' in our world today: those who are poor, addicted, struggling with jobs, family and social life, those on the margins of society due to health, age, education, race or economic background. Do we act like the rich man, ignoring their cries for help, or seeing and acting in some way to address their needs? Even experiencing the consequences in the next life of his indulgent and superficial earthly one, the rich man continued to make excuses rather than see the need for real change.

1) "I have five brothers, and I want [Lazarus] to warn them so they don't end up in this place of torment." (Luke 16:28) A glimmer of thought for people other than himself, but still focused on his personal family, not anyone in need. Abraham's answer is as much a warning as an explanation of why this couldn't happen. "Moses and the prophets have warned them. Your brothers can read what they wrote." (Luke 16:29) As wealthy Jews, the rich man's siblings would have had the opportunity to be familiar with the teachings of the Hebrew scriptures that contain many direct commandments to do good to the poor:

- from the law of Moses. “When you are harvesting your crops and forget to bring in a bundle of grain from your field, don’t go back to get it. Leave it for the foreigners, orphans, and widows.

Then the Lord your God will bless you in all you do.” (Deuteronomy 24:19)

- from the prophets. “‘I will speak against those who cheat employees of their wages, who oppress widows and orphans, or who deprive the foreigners living among you of justice, for these people do not fear me,’ says the Lord.” (Malachi 3:5)

2) “If someone is sent to them from the dead, then they will repent of their sins and turn to God.”

(Luke 16:30) Ironically, it may have been some of those very Pharisees who would be plotting Jesus’ death after witnessing the raising of another Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha of Bethany before the triumphant entry into Jerusalem. Rather than confirming the seriousness of the need to change their ways, this would only inflame their passion to get rid of anyone who would challenge how they understood and interpreted the law. Abraham correctly answered the rich man, “If they won’t listen to Moses and the prophets, they won’t listen even if someone rises from the dead.” (Luke 16:31) Luke wrote this gospel many years after Jesus’ resurrection. He’d seen that, even though Jesus rose from the dead, people still refused to believe in him. Those who failed to heed the call of Moses and the prophets to care for the needy and vulnerable were the same ones who killed Jesus, and who continued to persecute the church in spite of the resurrection. This parable shows that hardness of heart is a very difficult thing to soften that may not be possible for everyone despite all of God’s efforts to warn and correct them.

It amounts to the level of trust we have in God’s leading and guiding us in our Christian lives, even in areas that we may find hard or distasteful to get involved in. Like the classroom activity that requires students to stand facing each other, and one by one fall backward, expecting

to be caught by other classmates directly behind. Many can't do this, as their level of trust in each other isn't strong. Author Mitch Albom recalls doing this exercise in high school, especially impressed by a quiet, thin, dark-haired girl who always wore hand-me-down clothes. She crossed her arms across her chest, closed her eyes, leaned back, and didn't flinch. For a moment it looked as though she would thump on the floor. At the last instant, her assigned partner grabbed her head and shoulders and yanked her up. "Whoa!" several students yelled. Some clapped. The teacher pointed out that closing her eyes is what made the difference.

In bringing this story into the gospel lesson, Rev. Charles Hoffacker paraphrases the words of Abraham in the parable, "What we're about here is a whole new order, and strange to say, it works through failure, loss, and death. Nobody struts their way in. To enter you must fall backward, eyes closed, believing you will be caught. Lazarus is here beside me because he's somebody who knows how to take a fall. His whole life amounted to one big shove, but he closed his eyes, and trusted that the arms were there to catch him. He died into life.

You, on the other hand, lived into death. It wasn't your riches that was the problem, it was you. You couldn't see past your own gate to the sufferings of the world beyond it. You pretended they didn't exist. You looked right past one with obvious needs that you could have done something about. And that's just it. You refused to share even the tiniest part of your wealth. You said, 'No' to even the smallest request for help, thinking this might jeopardize your abundant lifestyle. Because you didn't believe that arms were there to catch you, even when you closed your eyes in death, you refused to let go and fall into life."

Let's heed the message of this parable, and be about God's business of bringing the values and good works of the Kingdom to people who need it the most now. Amen.