



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Hear Moses and the Prophets

Luke 16:19-31

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What does it look like to make the kingdom of God known? What does it look like to preach Good News? Brothers and sisters, we've been welcomed into the kingdom. Jesus sought each of us out while we were lost in the dark and he brought us into the light. But how do we share that light with others? *Do* we share that light with others? As we've been seeing in Luke's Gospel, this was Israel's problem. The Lord had chosen Abraham and his descendants to carry his light to the nations, but Israel hadn't done that. Israel was called on to shine her light brightly by her faithfulness to the Lord, but she instead prostituted herself to foreign gods and pagan idols. She was called to shine her light brightly by trusting in the Lord for her security, but instead she trusted in horses and chariots and forged forbidden alliances with pagan kings. She was called to shine her light brightly by showing justice and mercy to the poor, to widows, to orphans, and to the strangers in her midst, but instead she oppressed the poor and the stranger and cast them to the margins of society. Jesus has gone after his lost sheep and when he finds them he celebrates with them, but people like the Pharisees condemn him for it. They expected the Messiah to judge and condemn sinners, not rescue them.

What does it look like to make the kingdom of God known? Jesus shows us as he does all the things that Israel had failed to do. He goes to the poor and to the unclean, to sinners and to outcasts and preaches good news to them. And Jesus also shows us as he does more than simply preach: he heals the sick, he frees the captive, he gives sight to the blind, and he offers forgiveness to sinners. Jesus shows us as he offers not condemnation—all these

people already stand condemned—but as he offers redemption. Jesus shows us what the kingdom looks like. He also shows us how to make it known.

But we've got to ask: Are we making the kingdom known the way Jesus did? Do we even envision the kingdom the way Jesus did? And I think we have to admit that a lot of the time the answer to both questions is “no”. There are ways in which Jesus' rebukes of the Pharisees hit close to home for us too. How often do we resent the prodigal son when the Father welcomes him home? How often are we afraid to reach out to sinners and to the unclean because their uncleanness or their sinfulness might contaminate us? How often do we love money more than we love God, using the gifts we've been entrusted with to further our own agendas instead of God's? How often do we heap condemnation on sinners and poor people when what they really need is for us to show them the gracious generosity of the kingdom?

This morning we'll be looking at Luke 16:19-31. It's the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus and in it Jesus speaks to people who are materially rich. Jesus is still addressing the Pharisees and this comes right on the heels of Luke's statement that they were lovers of money. And so this parable ought to speak to us too. By global standards we, here in Canada, are rich people. But are we lovers of God or lovers of money? As Jesus makes clear over and over, the way that wealthy people view their riches and material possessions is a very good indicator of where they—where *we*—stand before the Lord.

The parable itself is Jesus' adaptation of what was a common folk story about how wealth and poverty can be reversed after death—with a rich man finding punishment and a poor man receiving great honour. As the story was usually told, however, the rich man would beg for a messenger to be sent to his relatives to warn them to change their lives and not to take their riches for granted.¹ Jesus changes the ending of the story to give a powerful warning

about the kingdom. We'll come back to that at the end. Look at verses 19-21:

“There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores.”

Jesus gives us a picture of extremes. Bleached wool was expensive enough, but to dye it purple was even more extravagant. The dye was made from the secretions of a certain type of sea snail. It was expensive, which is why kings wore purple. In Rome it was a sign of prestige simply to have a purple stripe on your toga. And yet it's not just this man's clothes that were ostentatiously rich. Jesus says he feasted sumptuously every day. This was a word where even for the well-to-do, to slaughter an animal and to have a banquet was something done only on very special occasions. Think of the father of the prodigal son killing the fatted calf to welcome his son home. This rich man feasts like that every day. Jesus doesn't give this man a name. He sounds like a Sadducee, but he certainly could have been one of the wealthier of the Pharisees—or he could be any one of us when we consider our standard of living compared to many people in today's world. We have closets full of fine clothes that go unworn and we feast each day in ways many people in the world can only dream of.

In stark contrast it poor Lazarus. Verse 20 says that he was “laid” at the rich man's gate. The Greek word suggests that he was stuck there, probably because he was lame. The gate wasn't the front door. It would have been the gate in the outer wall surrounding the rich man's house, where everyone coming and going would see him. To make matters worse, Jesus says that Lazarus was covered in sores—which means he was probably ritually unclean. He was so hungry that he longed for what fell from the rich man's table. This would have been the pieces of bread that the rich guests used to wipe their hands and that they threw under the

¹ Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (London: SPCK, 1972), pp. 182-183.

table. Worse still—and pointing to Lazarus’ helpless state—he’s harassed by dogs. Remember that these weren’t nice pet dogs or the sort of dogs that a modern homeless person might keep as a companion. These were feral dogs that roamed the city looking for food and that were attracted to Lazarus’ open sores.

Jesus gives us a picture of two very different men: one living at the very top of society and the other living at the very bottom. The Pharisees would have identified with the rich man. His riches were proof of God’s blessing. And they would have condemned Lazarus just like they condemned the poor people with whom Jesus was celebrating: He was poor and lame and hungry because he deserved to be poor and lame and hungry—because he was out of God’s favour.

Before we move one in the story, there’s one other interesting point. Again, Jesus doesn’t name the rich man, but he does name Lazarus. Lazarus means “God helps”, but more importantly, it’s a rabbinic form of the name Eliezer. Andrew Perriman makes a very good suggestion that Jesus may be making a connection with Abraham’s servant, Eliezer of Damascus.² If we go back to Genesis 15 we read how Abraham lamented to the Lord that he was childless and that his only heir was Eliezer of Damascus. In response, the Lord promised that he and Sarah would have a son. When Isaac was born he displaced Eliezer, a gentile and an outsider, as Abraham’s inheritor. In Jesus’ parable, the rich man is one of Abraham’s sons. Again, the Pharisees would have seen his riches as a sign of his election and a sign of God’s blessing on him. Lazarus, even though he was a Jew, was unclean because of his diseases and his poverty would have been seen as a sign of God’s disfavour. He was an outsider, like Eliezer of Damascus, and undeserving of Abraham’s inheritance.

And yet look at what happens:

“The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side.” (Luke 16:22-23)

Both men die. Jesus simply says that the rich man was buried, but that simple statement unpacks into elaborate funeral rites and ceremonies and all the feasting we’d expect to take place when a rich man died in an ancient culture. Proper burial was extremely important for the Jews and this man got not only a proper burial, but it came with all the pomp and circumstance that his wealth would have demanded. In contrast, Jesus simply says that Lazarus died and we wonder if anyone even noticed. There was no burial for Lazarus. His body could very well have been dragged away by the dogs while the rich man’s servants assumed he’d found a better spot to beg.

And yet Jesus says that even without recognition or proper burial, poor Lazarus was collected by the angels themselves and taken to Abraham’s “side” or Abraham’s “bosom”. The Jews described the Messianic age to come as one in which God’s people would feast and banquet in the kingdom along with Abraham. Lazarus was probably as surprised as anyone, not only to be carried by the angels into that great banquet, but to be seated at the table right next to Abraham, in the place of highest honour. That was the place reserved for someone like the rich man—not the place for a poor, sick, unclean beggar. And ye there he was.

Again, with stark contrast, Jesus describes the situation of the rich man. Despite his high status in life, he wakes to find himself being tormented in the afterlife. And not just tormented. Where Lazarus finds himself feasting at Abraham’s side, the rich man finds himself on the far side of a great gulf that separates him from that banquet and from Abraham. The tables have been turned. In life the rich man feasted and

a great social gulf kept Lazarus away and starving.

At this point I should say that Jesus’ parable isn’t meant to give us teaching about the afterlife. A lot of theologians, down through the ages, have gone to this parable assuming that Jesus’ point was to teach us about hades or about heaven and hell. That shows the danger of pulling portions of Scripture out of context. Jesus was using a well-known folk tale to make a point. We tell jokes and stories, for example, about people being met at the pearly gates by St. Peter with his list. St. Peter and his list are never the point of those stories. We don’t believe that this is what actually happens when we die—it’s a popular folk tale in our culture. The point is what happens to the people in the story or joke when they get there. Jesus is telling a story like that here. He’s using the elements of a common folk tale, not to teach about the afterlife, but to rebuke the Pharisees for their love of money and for their failure to truly live out the law and the prophets—to truly live as Abraham’s heirs.

And so here are these two men with their roles completely reversed in death. And yet the rich man still doesn’t get it. He sees Lazarus seated at the table with Abraham and he calls out in verse 24:

“Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.”

The rich man calls out to “Father Abraham”. His entire life he had deceived himself into thinking that Abraham was his father simply because he was one of Abraham’s biological descendants. Like the Pharisees, he was convinced that his genetics, his circumcision, his kosher diet, his separation from gentiles and from all things unclean, and all his sacrifices and offerings made at the temple guaranteed him a seat at the great banquet. And yet he feasted away his days while poor Lazarus starved at his gate. We should be reminded again of the Lord’s rebuke through the prophet Hosea:

² “The rich man, Lazarus, and Abraham”, *P.OST*, March 6, 2015, <http://www.postost.net/2015/03/rich-man-lazarus-abraham>.

For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings. (Hosea 6:6)

Or as Jesus puts it in Matthew 9:13, “I desire *mercy*, and not sacrifice.”

The rich man doesn't grasp Lazarus' position either. Not only is he still calling out to Abraham as if he has a claim on Abraham, but he calls out to Abraham to send Lazarus to him with some water. He sees Lazarus at Abraham's side and misreads the situation. It never occurs to him that Lazarus is there to be honoured. He thinks that Lazarus is there as Abraham's servant: a waterboy in hades. Abraham has to explain the situation to him. Look at verses 25-26:

“But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.’”

Jesus is still following the folk tale at this point. Abraham puts the rich man in his place. Lazarus wasn't taken by the angels to be Abraham's servant—or the rich man's for that matter. And the rich man hasn't landed in a place of torment by mistake. The rich man realises that the way he lived his life was wrong—he'd made assumptions about his status with Abraham and with the Lord, but his assumptions were wrong. Again, Jesus' point isn't to teach us the geography of the afterlife. He's warning the Pharisees—and through them he's warning all of Israel—that the role reversal that happened in this folks story could very well happen to them and that they'd better watch out. They'd better repent, because judgement comes with death and there are no appeals after that.

In the last verses of the chapter, now, Jesus changes the story. The way people were used to hearing it, the rich man realised the error of his ways and asked for warnings to be sent to his brothers lest they suffer the same fate—and the Lord or Abraham obliged. As Jesus tells the story, just the opposite happens. The warnings have *already* been sent. Look at verses 27-31:

“And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house—for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.’ But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.’”

Look at Abraham's response again: “If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.” With the coming of Jesus, the kingdom of God was breaking into the world. God sent Jesus to lead his people out of their long exile. He sent his Son to conquer sin and death and to lead his people out of their bondage to both. And so with every sickness healed, with every demon cast out, with every sin forgiven Jesus was declaring his Messiahship and he was proclaiming that God's kingdom has come. This is why tax collectors and sinners were celebrating. Jesus was setting them free. Imagine the joy of Lazarus as he was carried by the angels to feast at Abraham's side. This is the reality that Jesus was making known to the poor and the outcast and to sinners.

And yet the Pharisees grumbled every time they saw Jesus doing these things. The men who were sons of Abraham and who spent their lives in devotion to God's law, they couldn't accept what Jesus was doing. He was inviting all the *wrong* people to the banquet! And so Jesus is rebuking them; he's calling them to repentance just as he called the

tax collectors and sinners to repent. And here he warns them: They're like the rich man who refused poor Lazarus even the bread thrown under his table. They've been entrusted with the light, but they refuse to share it with those living in darkness. They've been entrusted with the law and the prophets—God's Word and the means of redemption for the nations—but they'd rather keep it to themselves and see the nations, the poor, the unclean tormented in hades. And at the end of the day, it's just that attitude towards the poor and towards sinners and towards all those on the outside—it's their refusal to celebrate as Jesus heals and forgives and makes new—that reveals that while they have the law and the prophets, they've never truly understood them and they've never truly lived them. And because of that, they may be surprised to find themselves, just like the rich man, on the receiving end of God's judgement. If they don't repent and recognise that in Jesus the kingdom has come, they will have forfeit their inheritance and it will be given to others.

This is where Jesus' choice of the name Lazarus or Eliezer comes back into the story. When Isaac was born, the gentile Eliezer lost his inheritance. The Pharisees—and the rest of Israel—are the nation born of Isaac. They are the inheritors of God's promises to Abraham. But with those covenant promises come covenant obligations—not just circumcision, avoiding unclean food, and sacrifices at the temple, but a seeking after justice and mercy and truly living out the lovingkindness of God in the world. If Israel refuses to fulfil those obligations and if she refuses to acknowledge that in Jesus they are being fulfilled, she will lose those covenant promises—she will lose her inheritance and it will be given to others, to outsiders grafted into Jesus who is the true Israel and the one truly faithful son of Abraham.

This has been the message of Luke's gospel from the beginning, when Mary sang out:

[H]e has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. (Luke 1:52-53)

This was the message that John the Baptist was preaching back in Chapter 3: “Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Luke 3:8-9). This was the warning that Jesus gave when he told the people to strive to enter through the narrow door before it’s shut, before it’s too late: “He will say, ‘I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil!’ In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God but you yourselves cast out. And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God” (Luke 13:27-29).

The rich man and his brothers, just like the Pharisees and just like unfaithful Israel, all had the law and the prophets. They didn’t need any more witnesses. Jesus’ rebuke that even if someone should be raised from the dead they still wouldn’t believe is a prophetic look ahead at Israel’s fate. They refused to listen to the law and the prophets. Jesus came to put Israel back on track, and she refused to hear him and continued to refuse even when he rose from the dead. And so others are being grafted in: unclean people, sinners, and gentiles are being grafted in and through Jesus are being given the inheritance that Israel has forfeit.

What does this mean for us? Brothers and sisters, we have Moses and the prophets. More importantly, we have Jesus too. We’re preparing in the coming weeks to celebrate his death and

resurrection. We even celebrate his ascension—the very fact that he *has* ushered in his kingdom and that he *is* reigning right now. And yet do we still miss the point of it all as Israel did? Like the Pharisees, do we love money more than Jesus? Like the rich man in the parable, do we have opportunities to show the lovingkindness of God to those in need—to the poor, the sick, the lonely, the hurting—but refuse to give? Do we hate our enemies instead of loving them and praying for them? Would we rather see sinners condemned than redeemed?

It was easy for the Pharisees to take their covenant status for granted. They were born into it. It should be a lot harder for us to take it for granted. The Lord extended his covenant grace to us because those who inherited by birth took it for granted. You and I have been grafted into Jesus and given life we never deserved. You and I are like Lazarus, carried by the angels to feast at Abraham’s side. That should be a hard thing to take for granted, but somehow we’re still prone to doing so. Brothers and sisters, let us live each day remembering that we are kingdom people, not by birth, but by adoption. Let us live each day remembering that we live in the kingdom, not because of our own merit, but for the merits of Jesus, who suffered death and rose from the grave for our sake. And as we who were undeserving received grace, let us show grace to everyone around us, and especially to those who need it the most. Friends, people who have experienced grace are the same people who celebrate when the lost are found, when the unclean are purified, when the sick are made well, when sinners are forgiven. People who know grace themselves rejoice to have the lost and the unclean and the sinful join us in the great feast of the redeemed. And maybe most importantly, people who have known grace will be stewards of grace, committing our lives and our riches to the work of God’s kingdom—to seeking out and serving the poor, the sick, and the sinful that they might rejoice and celebrate with us in the kingdom of God.

Let us pray: Gracious Father, as we enter this season of Passiontide again and recall the events of Jesus’ death and resurrection, remind us that he died and rose again for our sake. Help us to remember that we are sinners, that we are undeserving of your kingdom, but that in your love for us, you have given us grace. Put that grace at the core of our being that it might shape everything we do and that we might see the world always through the lens of grace. Give us a desire to share that grace with everyone we know and everyone we meet that they might know your grace as we have. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.