

“The Great Reversal”
Luke 16:19-31
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By Larry Gaylord

St Peter at the pearly gates asks a man who had just arrived what he had done during his life to merit getting into heaven. He replies, “Well, I fended off an entire motor cycle gang, big, fierce looking bikers who were trying to rob a family outside Mt. Rushmore. I told them if they didn’t leave immediately I’d call the police, and furthermore I’d pour sand in their gas tanks so they couldn’t ride their motorcycles. So they’d better get out of there right now, and leave that nice family alone.”

St Peter said, Wow, that’s pretty impressive. When did you do that?
The man said, “Oh, about thirty seconds ago.”

Today’s passage is something of a St-Peter-at-the-pearly-gates story, first century style. Abraham is the “gatekeeper”, not Peter. It’s not exactly a joke, but it’s not meant to be a serious description of the afterlife, either. Of course, the basic flaw in every St Peter joke is the idea that if you total up enough good deeds and they outweigh the bad, you’re in. We believe we enter into eternal relationship with God here and now, by faith, solely through the grace and goodness of Jesus Christ.

We might venture to ask why the Lord would have told such a tale as this. There is a certain shock value to it: his audience would have felt it immediately. Pharisees of the time often subscribed to a theology which held that godly obedience led to material blessing. Those who were most blessed in that way were obviously the most obedient. And those who were not—those who were poor, or outcast, or beggars on the street—clearly were not favored by God, and could be safely ignored by people. So went their theology. The shock comes when Jesus so casually reversed their presuppositions. By the power of a story, he’s saying, “Of course Lazarus will have his day. Of course you who lacked all semblance of humanity in your time on earth, will answer for it. Haven’t you ever read the prophets?” They would have been stunned speechless. They had spent their *lives* studying the prophets. And as it dawned on them that Jesus was speaking of *them*, portraying *their* eternal destiny, they would not have been amused.

But—now that he had their attention, there was of course another purpose, a redemptive purpose, behind the story. Charles Dickens was influenced by this parable when he wrote “A Christmas Carol.” Ebenezer Scrooge comes at last to the horrifying scenes shown him by the ghost of Christmas Future, and asks in agony, “Are these the things that *must* be, or that *may* be?” In other words, is there anything I can do to change this destiny? And that day, that Christmas morning, was like none other, and Scrooge was a changed man, and the joy of sharing and blessing others, filled his life.

We can cultivate compassion. We can pull down the barriers that separate us from one another.

This story from Luke today is a cartoon: its characters are extreme versions of real people. But cartoons contain some great truths you can’t get across in any other way. The rich man is stupendously, sickeningly selfish. He dresses up every day in outfits that most people would reserve for special occasions. Why the inner need to “dress to the

teeth” asks theologian Ken Bailey. Apparently, the craving to impress others is never fully satisfied. He has the finest foods every day—which also means he never gave his staff a day off, so that he caused them to break the Sabbath. And he had a huge capacity to ignore the suffering at his doorstep. The only thing he doesn't have in the story is a *name*. Jesus, in telling the story, doesn't give us a name. And a name is integral to our humanity. The man's lifestyle had diminished his humanity. Jesus has drawn an exaggerated picture to grab our attention. This was a man who had it all, and eagerly flaunted it.

The poor man, by contrast, had nothing—not food, not shelter, not medical care, not health, apparently no family—but he has a name! Lazarus: it means “the one whom God helps.” Great name: he draws his identity from God, from what God has done for him. So should we all. Often enough as a pastor I've heard people wonder what their lives amount to, what their contribution has been. Grace means we find our worth not in what we've accomplished but in what God has done for us, and in the love that God has for us. Another thing Lazarus has is dogs: they lick his wounds. I always thought that was just trying to show how awful his situation was. But one commentator believes the dogs were a blessing. It was believed that dog saliva helped to heal wounds. They were Lazarus's friends. The dogs had compassion on Lazarus: their *master* did not.

There is an unbridgeable chasm between us: so says father Abraham. But rather than imagine that this was God's punishment, it is simply the logical extension of a way of life. He--the rich man--had spent his life building barriers between himself and the pain of the world. Indeed, he still regarded Lazarus as a nothing and a nobody. It's interesting to realize that he recognizes the beggar, and knows him by name. So it's not as though he was totally unconscious of him in earthly life. Still, even in the next world, he wouldn't speak to him directly. He speaks to Abraham, and tries to order the former beggar around. He says to father Abraham, send Lazarus down here. Send that nobody down here into the flames, and tell him to give me a little cool water. If the man himself had ever lifted a finger for Lazarus on the other side, that would be one thing. Yet he expects a huge sacrifice of the poor man on his behalf—a sacrifice he would never have dreamed of making when the situation was reversed. He didn't notice that Lazarus the poor man now had a prime place right next to Abraham.

At this point, Lazarus might be expected to let him have it. But he has no vengeance to exact. Ken Bailey writes, On earth, each day for Lazarus was a journey of faith. Like Abraham, he went out not knowing where he was going.

But no, Lazarus wouldn't be fetching water for the rich man. Those days were gone. Attitudes can harden, people can grow cold and unfeeling toward others, and then there comes a point when it is too late. Or is it ever too late?

This week I received a letter from a school friend whom I hadn't heard from in 30 years. He was writing to apologize for some supposed insult that happened way back then, and described himself as having been extremely selfish. I don't remember any of that about him. I just remember he was extremely smart, and creative and energetic. But what an amazing thing for him to do: to reach out across the chasm of years with a letter, to try to reconnect. The point is, in Christ, there's always hope. In Christ, it's never too late.

Some would say, Oh, yes, once we die it's too late. But the love of God can reach us no matter where we are. The grace of God is greater than we ever imagined.

As long as we can listen, as long as we can take a step toward God, it's never too late. And sometimes we have our eyes opened to things that were right there all the time, we just didn't see them.

William Willimon of Duke University tells of asking a foreign exchange student from Holland what he would remember as his most vivid memory of America. "Armen und elend," came the instant reply: Poverty and misery. The young European had never known grinding poverty until he walked the streets of the neighborhood less than a mile from Duke University. And Willard Willimon said his own eyes were opened in a new way to conditions he had gotten used to—so used to he hadn't really noticed. Jesus is asking us to notice, and to reach out—to people in wretched poverty, of course. To those others in our lives, too, who are hoping, and in their own way, crying out to us, if we listen. They might look and dress and act just like us, but they are spiritually suffering, just like Lazarus, hoping for a few crumbs of empathy and caring. It might be a friend who needs us to listen, a spouse who needs understanding, a fellow worker who is going through a tough time right now.

There's a villain in this story of Jesus, but I have to confess, I feel sorry for him. He's so trapped in the place where he is—trapped really in himself. This isn't a story about a selfish man who got what was coming to him. It's about community—what makes it, what destroys it, and how we are meant to belong to each other. John Newton it is said, wrote the words of the great hymn, Amazing Grace. There was a man trapped in a dehumanizing place: he was deeply involved in the slave trade. And when we're caught up in a powerful economic system, it's hard to break free. But grace, God's grace, broke into John Newton's life, and he had a new song: "sing a new song to the Lord." It didn't happen all at once: his full conversion took a while. But he became a leading abolitionist, and worked to end the terrible sin of slavery.

The great irony of Jesus' tale is, the guy who the wealthy one didn't even notice in life is the one he hopes will come and help him now. Father Abraham replies that it would be impossible. "Can't happen: You can't get there from here." The distance between them is too great. Where's the gospel in that? And yet—our Christian story, our gospel, is about One who did leave a place of great glory, to be born into poverty on earth, and to give his life for the undeserving. If Lazarus hadn't been stopped, he, Christ-like, might have made that harrowing trip, in order to show compassion to one who had done nothing to deserve it. It is often the case that those who have known their share of suffering have the most kindness toward others, and the most forgiveness.

Where, then, will we go to bridge the great gulf? Who is doing that in our world today? Aun Sang Sukii is a Nobel Peace prize winner from Burma. She has lived in exile from her country for years. Recently she risked it all, to go back and try to dialogue with leaders of the regime there, putting her own freedom and even her life in danger. We're reminded of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who had a comfortable professorship at Union Seminary in New York, but voluntarily went back to Germany to be with his people in their hour of trial, and was put to death by the Nazi regime.

We are both Lazarus and the other, you and I. We know our brokenness, we know our dependence on God's free grace. Yet we are also prone to thinking we are self-sufficient, and to ignoring the hurts, both within, and all around us. But by the grace of God, we can bridge the great chasm—all that divides and separates. We can live for God's purpose, to

unite, not divide, to unite all things I heaven and on earth, through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

