

Pentecost 16C (9/29/2019)

Amos 6:1a, 4-7

Psalm 146

1 Timothy 6:6-19

Luke 16:19-31

Once we have a name and an address, “the poor” ceases to be a category and becomes a person, a life, a neighbor. The challenge is to see that person for who he is, and not as an abstraction or a means to an end. “Good news for the poor” is good news for everyone when we recognize the gift of proximity to one another.

Lazarus is the only character in all of Jesus' parables with a proper name.

Isn't that remarkable? He's not the same Lazarus we meet in John's Gospel, the brother of Mary whom Jesus raises from the dead. In our Gospel from Luke, he's a character in one of Jesus' stories, and the only one who has a name. I suppose it could be a coincidence, but I doubt it, which raises the question: Why? **What difference does it make that Jesus gives Lazarus a name?**

Some speculate that there is, in fact, a connection between the Lazarus in Luke and the one in John, although that's a bit of a leap given the important differences between the accounts in the two Gospels. What's more, the name is probably not unique in the ancient world, although its meaning is significant.

Lazarus is the Latinized form of the Aramaic *El'āzār*, or “God is my help.” Of course, this is a fitting name for both biblical characters named Lazarus, but for different reasons. So, I prefer to approach the character of Lazarus in our Gospel from Luke today on his own terms.

Needless to say, it's a memorable parable, and the implications are startling: those who suffer want in this life will be comforted in the next, whereas

those who enjoy abundance in this life will suffer in the next. Notice that the rich man's fiery destiny is not so much a punishment as it is simply a divine reversal: "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." It's a narrative enactment of Mary's Song in the first chapter of Luke: "[God] has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly"; as well as the beatitudes and woes in the sixth chapter: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God... woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation."¹

The promise of eternal solace for Lazarus is certainly good news for the poor, precisely the good news Jesus insists on preaching.² But, what about those of us who have more than we need? Even if we're not draped in luxury like the rich man, what does Jesus' parable have to say about our future?

If we were to take this story literally, it would portray a strange kind of grace. But, it's a parable, a deliberately dramatic teaching that's not meant to be taken literally. So, Jesus' intent is not to provide us with a blueprint for the afterlife, but don't let that temper the severity of his judgment on the injustice at the heart of the parable. **Every detail in the story is exaggerated³ in order to draw our attention to the tragic absurdity of a world where abject poverty and extreme wealth exist quite literally side by side.**

¹ See R. Alan Culpepper, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX, 315.

² Luke 4:18.

³ See Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 605.

This insight sheds light on the details themselves, the imagery of proximity and distance, for example. If the rich man's Hades is but a reflection of the hell that Lazarus lived every day outside his gate, then the "great chasm" fixed between them in the afterlife is but a continuation of the gap that existed between them in life. Languishing just a few steps from the rich man's home, Lazarus might as well have been a world away.

What are the ways that we distance the poor from the rich, even when we live in close proximity? Consider, for example, our tendency to generalize poor and rich, to think of them as categories rather than people. **So long as poverty remains an idea to ponder or an issue to address, there's no need to engage with an actual poor person.**

This is where the naming of Lazarus becomes significant. If the poor man in Jesus' parable had no name, it would be easier to lump him in with all the poor, those countless people who are very diverse, yet who are indistinguishable from each other when we don't see them individually for who they are. **By naming Lazarus, and by situating him permanently at the rich man's gate, Jesus compels the poor man's neighbors to know him, preventing him from becoming a prop.** That the rich man knows Lazarus' name yet has neglected to bridge the distance between them only adds to the parable's tragedy. Even in Hades, the rich man can't acknowledge Lazarus' dignity, but thinks only of himself and his brothers, and how Lazarus might be of service to them.

Nevertheless, **naming is one step toward seeing, toward knowing the unknown person in our midst.** On the return trip from my text study this week in Tacoma, where I'd had a conversation with other preachers about this very parable, I came to the stoplight at 21st and Pacific Avenue. On the sidewalk to my right sat an elderly gentleman in a wheelchair holding a sign that read, "My name is Nate. I have Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma. Anything helps." I hesitated for a moment, then the light changed and I reluctantly drove away. The irony was not lost on me. Even though I knew his name – my name – there might as well have been a great chasm fixed between the two of us in that moment.

Dear church, **once we have a name and an address, "the poor" ceases to be a category and becomes a person, a life, a neighbor.⁴ The challenge is to see that person for who he is, and not as an abstraction or a means to an end. In other words, it is to recognize the chasm between rich and poor for the illusion that it is, and to move intentionally toward one another.**

When we do, we can expect to meet our Lord moving toward us, the one who promises to show up in the stranger, in a gathering of two or three in his name, in the breaking of the bread. The richness of our relationship, our sharing in the spirit of Christ, is the treasure that awaits us. And "good news for the poor" becomes good news for everyone when we recognize the gift of proximity to one another.

⁴ Kris Rocke, Preaching Peace table, Street Psalms, Tacoma, 9/24/2019.