

C Lectionary 26 9.25.22

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15; Luke 16:19-31

Focus Statement: There is always resurrection.

Well now, another week, another opportunity to be grateful that Will jumps us into the Gospel acclamation, so we don't have to ponder too much that "thanks be to God" at the end of the Gospel reading. Luke has yet again given us quite the doozy of a parable.

To understand where this parable is taking us, let's first look at where it came from. Last week, we heard the parable of the dishonest manager and Jesus' request to "make friends by means of dishonest wealth" because "You cannot serve God and wealth." Immediately after Jesus said those words, "you cannot serve God and wealth," scripture tells us that "The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed [Jesus]." This parable is in response to that ridicule. The Pharisees laughed at Jesus' seeming disregard for the value of wealth, and in this short story Jesus took valuing wealth above all else to its furthest conclusion. You want to serve wealth, Jesus seemed to be saying, here's what it looks like if you serve wealth.

The parable opens with this tableau of social stratification. A rich man dressed in purple and fine linens feasts sumptuously everyday while at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, "who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores." Though separated by no more than a gate, these two could not be further from one another. The gate may as well have been the grand canyon for it's impassibility in the lives of these two men.

One thing I find interesting in this parable right off the bat is the use of names. “There was a rich man” Jesus said. This is a turn of phrase Jesus used to start a lot of his parables, “there was a man, a woman, a village, an owner of a vineyard, a laborer.” Each of these unnamed characters are meant to invite the listener to hear themselves in the story of the parable, to place themselves in the unnamed character. This openness does not exist for the poor man. His name is Lazarus, he has a personhood, an identity. And because he has an identity, Jesus makes it impossible for us to read ourselves into that character. We are not Lazarus, Jesus makes very clear, laying like a beggar at the gate. We don’t have to be the rich man, we can read ourselves in other places, but we cannot be Lazarus. He is not us.

That we aren’t Lazarus is good news at the start of the parable, when Lazarus was lying in misery at the rich man’s gate, but very quickly the parable takes a turn. “The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham.” The Greek here is he was carried away to the bosom of Abraham. In the Hebrew tradition, the bosom of Abraham, right up against his chest where you can hear his heart beating, is the place of greatest intimacy with God, of highest bliss and most ease. It is the place where the great heroes of the faith are said to have rested, people like Enoch, Elijah, and Moses. It is to this place of greatest honor that Lazarus was brought upon his death. Meanwhile, the text tells us with no fanfare, “The rich man also died and was buried.”

It is from death that for the first time we hear the rich man speak. And not just speak but speak the name of the poor man at his gate. Though, interestingly, while he spoke Lazarus’ name, he did not speak to Lazarus. Instead, he spoke to Abraham saying, “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.” When Abraham refused this request, explaining how the seeming impassibility of the gate on earth had become a true uncrossable chasm in the afterlife, the rich man again cried out, then, “send [Lazarus] to my father’s house—for I have five brothers—so that they will not also come into this place of torment.” Here we might applaud the man for considering the fate of his brothers, but we also have to notice that in both requests, he treats Lazarus as his errand boy, not as a fellow child of Abraham but as someone who exists to serve his own beck and call. “Rip Lazarus away from his place of great honor and comfort and make him come help me in my suffering,” is the unspoken request here. The uncrossable chasm between the two exists not just in the afterlife but in the mind and heart of the rich man.

And again, even to this second request on behalf of his brothers, Abraham says no. “They have Moses and the prophets... If they do not listen to [them]”—and here let me point out the blatant foreshadowing that is Jesus, five chapters out from the crucifixion, eight from the stone being rolled away and the tomb found empty, uttering these words—“If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, *neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the death.*”

And with those words the story ends and we are left with the following hard observation. This is a parable told to the Pharisees, clearly meant to be the rich man. We, overhearers of this story, are the target of Jesus’ last observation. We are the brothers, having not only Moses and the prophets, but someone, Jesus, who has risen from the dead. Will we be

convinced? Have we been convinced? Do we see the poor man lying at our own gates? Have we learned to make friends by means of dishonest wealth or is dishonest wealth a friend of us? This parable is meant to leave us wishing that the “give away all your possessions” command of Jesus from a few weeks ago was a viable option, because man oh man, what do we do with this chasm Jesus has built?

It was in the hole of this parable that I found good news in the most unlikely of places. I found it in our first reading for this morning, from the thirty-second chapter of Jeremiah.

To set the scene from Jeremiah, this passage is from the middle of the siege of Jerusalem, right before the city fell to the Babylonians. Throughout the first thirty-one chapters, Jeremiah has been telling the rulers of Israel, you have to change your ways. Things are bad, people are suffering, you are not living in the ways of the kingdom, and the result of this will be your destruction. Turn away from your selfish ways and return to God, because the Babylonians are at the gate, and your end is at hand. In chapter thirty-two, that end has come. Verse two tells us, “the army of the king of Babylon was besieging Jerusalem, and the prophet Jeremiah was confined in the court of the guard,” and everything was falling apart. And in the middle of all that devastation and destruction, the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah and said, “buy a field.”

Buy a field. And not just any field, buy your cousin Hanamel’s field, the one in the middle of the war zone. Buy this field, God said to Jeremiah, as a sign to God’s people that even now hope is not lost. Things look terrible now. There seems no victory now. But now is no the

end, now is only now. “For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, ‘houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.’”

Jeremiah’s field assures us that this morning’s parable is just that, a parable. It is a story meant to tell us a truth, meant to point us in a direction and rethink all our actions and expectations. It is a parable designed to paint for us a picture of the great reversal proclaimed in the Magnificat, when Mary sang of God, “he has brought the powerful down from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.” Our sending song for this morning is The Canticum of the Turning, which is a favorite of ours, and was also a favorite of every ideological seminary student out there hoping to change the world. It was mine, until I once heard Bishop Satterlee remark, “we all like singing about how ‘From the halls of power to the fortress tower, Not a stone will be left on stone’ until we realize that some of the halls of power and fortress towers that will be torn away, stone by stone, will be our halls of power, our fortress towers. That the fires of justice burn not just for those we oppose, but for us as well.” The turning of the world means the turning of our world as well. And while this parable forces us to stare that in the face, Jeremiah and his field remind us that someone did rise from the dead, and so too will we. That in his dying and rising Jesus crossed the uncrossable chasm so that we can never be separated from the God who loves us. Dear people of God, let this parable not challenge you so much as energize you, let it open your eyes and hearts to those who dwell on the far sides of chasms, knowing that in Jesus no chasm is uncrossable, no person is unreachable, because ours is the God with such

confident hope for the future as to invest in real estate in a war zone. Thank be to God.

Amen.