

In our early service, we acted out our Gospel lesson with the children present. A parable about two men dying – one rich and the other a beggar – does not on the surface seem to be child-friendly; most particularly so, when one man ends up in Heaven and the other in Hell. Yet, children readily note the inequality between an unnamed rich man feasting sumptuously and a beggar named Lazarus, whose lies by the man's door, hoping for crumbs thrown to the dogs, but instead, the dogs lick his wounds. At the service, we set the rich man's table, placed a gate and set beggar Lazarus outside that gate, disheveled and hungry.

Two notes before we read the parable. First, the rich man is dressed in purple. Purple is not only the color of royalty and honor, but purple dyed clothing was expensive. There is no doubt the man is among the elite. Second, when we hear Lazarus hoped to receive what fell from the rich man's table, it seems there was a practice of using bread as napkins. If your hands were greasy from the meal, bread would absorb it. So one would wipe one's hands, and perhaps face with a piece of bread, and then toss it on the ground for the dogs to eat. That's the food Lazarus was hoping to receive.

Luke 16:19-31 – a parable of an unnamed rich man and a beggar named Lazarus

"There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰ And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹ who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²² The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham.^[a] The rich man also died and was buried. ²³ In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side.^[b] ²⁴ He called out, '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.' ²⁵ But Abraham said, '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. ²⁶ Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.' ²⁷ He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house— ²⁸ for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.' ²⁹ Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.' ³⁰ He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' ³¹ He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"

It may not be just for children that we mute references to Hell in this parable. Even when we read words about Hell in Scripture, we may read over them, discounting their relevance. Honestly, the concept of damnation to Hell does not fit well with my theology of the gracious, loving, forgiving God revealed in the person of Jesus. Even while acknowledging this is Jesus' parable, I find it hard to conceive of a God who would create an unpassable chasm in the afterlife, preferring images of a heavenly banquet free of earthly divisions of nationality, class, race, and religion.

Of course, if there is to be a separation in the eternal realm, I have some candidates for admission to the non-air-conditioned living areas. Sure, there is Adolph Hitler, who seems to be on everyone's list of those next to whom we don't want to be seated in the afterlife's dining room; but as we go through life, we may have our personal picks of those we hope will "go to Hell." We may have even told them so – in a Christian way.

I first used this stark parable in a service focused on involving children in my last interim pastorate. As we planned, more than one of us wondered if we might better choose a more child-friendly story. I shared that thought, but then realized that, while we might mute references to torment, the contrasts of rich and poor in this earthly existence is not past the consciousness of children; in fact, children can often help us see disparities to which we have become blind, feel things to which we may have become numb, and remind us of ideals we may have forgotten. This includes any Lazarus who sits as close as our front door.

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus is not meant to be comforting – in the first or twenty-first century – particularly for we those among the top 5% of the wealthiest in the world, even if we are among the lower 99% in this country. What do we do with a parable that makes us feel comfortable? Perhaps it is similar to other discomforts for which we seek relief.

If I have a headache, I take a tablet. If I am warm, I turn on a fan; and if cold, I put on an extra layer. We learn to navigate our discomforts. We also do so in our relationships. If we are questioned about something we have not done, we are quick to create an excuse, or point a finger of blame. When it comes to our money, and a preacher's suggestion that on the wealth chart we are closer to the rich man than to Lazarus, we may scramble to find some comfort, make some excuse, or seek some way to get off the hook from any guilt caused by finding Lazarus at our front door.

One verse in our I Timothy reading might help. It has been used to bring relief for those who feel discomforted by the stark judgment portrayed in the parable. One verse people seem to know for certain, and correct us if we misquote it, is I Timothy 6:10. If they hear someone say, "The Bible says 'money is the root of all evil'", they jump to their feet responding, "No, the Bible does not say money is the root of all evil, but the love of money is the root of all evil." It is as if this little word "love" sets us free! We reason: "I don't love money; money is just a necessary evil; I am responsible with my money; I tithe, giving away 10% or more of my income. Don't pin that love of money thing on me!"

The sense of relief is widened when we read in a later verse, “As for those who are rich in this age...” for within that phrase is an acknowledgment there were rich in the early church, and it is quickly rationalized the church needs benefactors. The conditions placed on those with riches were simply to shun being haughty or trusting in riches, and to be ready to share their money. That seems an easy enough tradeoff for keeping wealth.

Yet, within us we know the love of money is rooted in loving the comforts it buys, the conveniences it allows, the security it brings. It is easy to miss the subtlety that the more we have, the more we need to maintain, repair, replace, secure, and insure. We also tend to justify our own wealth by calling it “limited” compared to those with so much more.

The other thing money can do is help us avoid the discomfort of having a Lazarus as close as our front doors. Unlike the rich man of our parable, we can move away from Lazarus. Money allows us to bypass him, like a highway that loops around a center city. Yet, as we circle around possible Lazarus’ by taking a bypass, we may think back to a time in our lives when we did not have as much.

One of the sadnesses felt in visiting our Mother is her not remembering she was an excellent cook, a wonderful gardener and a lover of birds. We remind her and she says, “I was?” Still, we continue to page through “Birds and Blooms” magazine during visits, with its beautiful pictures, even reading some of the shorter anecdotes. If she falls asleep, I will sometimes read a longer article, and an older issue at which we were looking contained one about birds storing food for the winter. It noted Chickadees have a unique ability to remember exactly where they hide the food they are storing for the winter; other birds hide food, but can’t remember where, and must search for it again. The study discovered a Chickadee’s brain actually grows in size in the fall and winter months, and then decreases when spring returns and food is more abundant. I thought, how cool is our evolutionary, Creator God!

I thought about this in terms of our own comfort in the seasons of our lives. I expect many of us, when younger and with less discretionary money, had ideals of communal sharing and simple living – whether we were a starving student, artist or engineer, teacher or preacher, homemaker or nurse, foreman or manager. Then, as years added to our age, and equity accumulated in our portfolios, we may have found ourselves moderating, compromising or even rejecting some of those ideals. Glimmers of those lost dreams come back when a youth asks, “Didn’t you ever think the whole world could live in peace and all people could share things equally?”

As I sort through this parable of Jesus, I think we are called back to a memory of the basics of our faith, reminding us where we have forgotten some of our simplest hopes and dreams. This parable is not meant to scare the hell out of us to secure a better heavenly fate, but to remind us of what our comfort may have caused us to forget.

As we closed the first service with the children, the rich man’s table was disassembled from a solitary feast for one. We transformed the table to a communion table to which Christ invites all. We look ahead to sitting at that table on next week’s World Communion Sunday.

God envisions us to live together on this earth, not with gates and fences, not with some children well fed at home and others only fed well at school, but with an equality the world will seek to convince us is an unreachable ideal. Our challenge is to not allow our own comfort to diminish the ideal, which means we will keep our eyes open to see, and make it a point not to bypass, any Lazarus who is as close as our front door.