

Reversal of Fortune

Have you seen Lazarus? He looks like he slept on the street, probably because he did. He pushes a shopping cart filled with all his worldly possessions. She's the one who speaks Arabic. He's the one with that far-away stare in his eyes.

He was standing at the I-75 exit ramp with a sign that says he's a veteran and would work for food. You saw her at the grocery store last week, slipping a can of tuna into her bag.

Have you seen Lazarus? She calls our church frequently to ask for a bag of groceries and some milk for her children. He's the quiet man who came here to worship a few weeks ago but left feeling out of place.

Lazarus isn't any particular person. Lazarus is all the people we rush past, ignore, step around, look through or dismiss. Lazarus is everyone we encounter but don't really see. It's not because we're mean or evil. It's just that life's full and busy and we have to draw our circle of concern smaller and smaller to keep it manageable. Lazarus is everyone we've pushed outside of the circle. And we read his story in Luke 16. The whole chapter consists of Jesus' teachings about possessions. The first part of the chapter is addressed to followers, with the lesson that should be shrewd and not naïve in the ways of the world. Today's choices have consequences for the future.

And now Jesus turns to the Pharisees, that Luke labels "lovers of money." They were men of position and power. Jesus fashioned the rich man in his parable to represent them. It's intriguing that Luke records dozens of Jesus parables. In all of them only one character is named. It's Lazarus. This isn't the same Lazarus as Jesus' friend that he raised from the grave – Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha of Bethany.

The name is important because, ironically, the rich man is nameless while the beggar is named – just the opposite of the way it is in the real world. The name "Lazarus" is important also because it means "God has helped." At first glance it would appear just the opposite – that God had helped the very rich man and ignored the very poor man. But Jesus turned the story around and showed his listeners that the possessions we covet the most don't help us but do the opposite – they stand between us and the kingdom of God.

As we dive into the scripture for today, I want to clarify that the point of this parable is not the afterlife but about how we choose to live together in the here and now. Like all parables, Jesus uses metaphor to make his point. Some of you that have grown up with preaching and teaching about eternal damnation can take a deep breath because this is not what this story is all about.

Our story comes from the book of Luke, where earlier in Luke we heard Mary's song, where she says that God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. Mary is quoting Hannah from the Hebrew scriptures, so she is showing her connection to the faith of her ancestors.

And so a few chapters away from Mary's song, Jesus tells this parable that is simply a continuation of what we already know. In the life of God, power is reversed. Those who don't have enough dwell in the presence of God. Those who have too much, those who do not

participate in the beloved community of God because of their status-related pride, those who pass by suffering every day and don't even bat an eye – they are distancing themselves from God. Their own actions are what creates that chasm between them and God. And that distance is its own kind of hell.

This nature of God as a God of power reversals can be so hard for us to accept when we contemplate the ways our own power – whether related to race or gender or sexuality or class or power over other creations – have to be reversed in the life of God.

God lifts up women and non-binary people and brings men down from their thrones.

God lifts up black and indigenous, brown and black and asian/pacific islanders and brings white people down from their thrones.

God lifts up those in poverty and brings down the rich.

God lifts up those with disabilities and brings down the able.

God lifts up the plants and animals, the water, and the land, and brings down humanity.

Moses and the prophets have told us this is true. The prophets – ancient and modern – have told us and shown us and lived this truth. We can see this truth too when we are paying attention in the lives of marginalized people rising up in Love for Justice.

Jesus assures us – everything that is needed for personal and collective transformation is here. And it's been here for quite some time. Transformation doesn't happen through magic! It won't happen through the dead returning. It won't happen because of some extraordinary event, unless that event simply connects the already present dots.

Everything that we need in order to understand who God is, who we are, and what it means to share this life together, has already been given to us. We have been given these stories that point to truth. We have seen the lives taken, and seen the communities rise up. We have seen the ways power hoards and life is destroyed. God took on flesh and showed us what is possible, even in these days, these systems, these realities.

What are the barriers to us understanding the justice that God is calling us to? Not even the dead rising and coming to tell us it is true will convince us if we are not convinced by scriptures and the prophets. What makes us so self absorbed that we don't even notice the ones suffering around us?

The lowly – which is to say all who are oppressed – will be lifted up.

Do we believe it is so? For us? For others? Do we recognize what it means to be “the lowly” intimately held in the presence of God as Lazarus was by Abraham?

The powerful – which is to say all who are in positions of power and neglect their responsibility to share power and resources and space – will be torn from their thrones. Do we believe that's

true? For us? For others? Do we recognize the ways unjust power creates these insurmountable chasms and keeps God at a distance?

Part of what deceived the Rich Man is that he was unable or unwilling to recognize the ways in which his life is woven into the lives of others around him. If only he could have seen that thin line between his life and Lazarus, maybe both of them would have had different experiences. But because he saw a great divide between his experiences, his life than Lazarus life, everyone lost.

We are not isolated individuals making choices for our lives – we are parts of a whole. All of us. There is no “I” separate from the collective. God made us and the creatures and the creations this way and as God works among us to restore creation to its flourishing, this reality will be revealed. And things will be changed, and the changes will feel like hell or feel like freedom and love depending on what and in whom we are invested.

How many of you have heard of shopping therapy? In a capitalist system, we are encouraged to turn to shopping and buying to cope with life. Having a bad day? Treat yourself! Spend just a little over your normal budget. Buy something you wouldn’t normally buy. Whatever your budget, just give yourself permission to not think about it for a minute and relish in the pleasure of a splurge coffee or a new outfit.

This desire and impulse have been intentionally ingrained in us. Those systems that cause violence – to us, to our neighbors, to our efforts to do good in the world – have found ways to make a profit off of our despair and keep us from channeling our grief or anger towards change instead of a shopping spree at Target!

Then the source of our bad day comes from the impact of an under-resourced workplace, the overwhelming sense of struggle in our country, our own lack of access to the resources we need in our lives, or the feelings of being needed in too many directions without enough time to “do it all”, we are not encouraged to tend meaningfully to those feelings. To pay attention to their roots or who is benefiting from them or how many others might be feeling the same way.

We are instead, encouraged to turn off, to disconnect, to stop seeing the Lazarus within us, neglected and deprived from connection. Instead we are encouraged in the direction of one step closer to the rich man – even in the smallest of ways, just one little purchase – a mindless desire to spend money as a kind of emotional reward – is the product of a world that has pointed us towards the rich man as the peak example of human satisfaction.

Our retail therapy is a coping mechanism that keeps the real Rich Man alive, deceives us into believing that feeling of satisfaction after a purchase is a kind of being fully alive, and keeps the Lazarus within and around ignored, unseen and untended.

What might happen if we start paying attention to even those small and slight desires to cope with the real pain of the world with some kind of purchase or consumption? If we pause and examine those desires? If we choose to believe that God might have another way of bringing our aching souls nourishment that actually leads to a different kind of being alive? One where we are all more alive together.

The Rich Man eventually came to discover that all along he was the one being deceived. But it was too late for him by then. He missed out on the chance to be truly alive. Moses and the prophets point to what it looks like to live abundantly. All that we need has already been given. We have to make ourselves aware of the ways that we, too, can be deceived in the most everyday ordinary ways. The deception of capitalism that pits against one another; that creates competition between human lives and basic resources, that blames those who are suffering in poverty and that turns us against ourselves from the inside out – it is a spiritual evil that must be rooted out from within our own souls.

Lazarus was laying outside the gate of the rich man. How many days did the rich man pass by without a greeting, without an invitation inside, without offering even a meal or the crumbs of a meal. Most likely, the rich man never bothered to even notice Lazarus. He was practically invisible until the rich man saw him as a servant.

We are not all rich, but we do all have forms of goodness in our lives that helps us see when others are neglected.

We may have family – chosen or given – with whom we find deep belonging.

We may have creative gifts that feed our soul – writing, singing, dancing, painting.

We may have social power in its various forms.

We may have access to things that have helped us to heal – things like good friends or therapy or teachers. or nature or just the right books when we needed them.

We may have the ability to cook incredible food. Or to plant gardens. Or to create spaces that are warm and hospitable for misfits and outsiders.

We need to pause sometimes...Assess. Take stock of what we have. And pay attention to who in our lives or our surroundings doesn't have access to the same thing.

Maybe the person or people aren't invisible to us what they are lacking and what we have plenty is visible.

Maybe we need to see the people we interact with regularly from a different angle. Or maybe we walk around our lives without really seeing those who lack a sense of belonging.

Where you have plenty, can you see where others do not?

Where people have less access to things you value – do they become less visible to you? How do you share what you have – even if money is not the thing you have?

Grace Lee Boggs said "We never know how our small activities will affect others through the invisible fabric of our connectedness. In this exquisitely connected world, it's never a question of 'critical mass'. It's always about critical connections.

The world didn't get turned upside down by the actions of a few but by the inactions of many over generations.

You and I are not going to turn it right side up all by ourselves. But together, one by one, day by day, we can show Jesus' transforming love to others

every time you bring sandwiches for NOAH

every time you look a street person in the eye – not with disgust but with compassion;

every time you visit a neighbor or show kindness to a stranger

every time you put an offering in the plate.

every time you see Lazarus rather than seeing through him, you're passing along the life changing love of God to someone who can pass it on. We who have the privilege of gathering here for worship also have the means to heal many hurts in the world, to reach across the chasm. I pray that this ancient parable that is filled with such simple wisdom, will take root deep in our hearts today. May it be so. Amen.