

Rio Rancho Presbyterian

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THE PARABLE OF THE SIX BROTHERS

Luke 16: 19-31

Most of Jesus' sixty parables make one major point. However, there are about four that are called "double-edged" parables, meaning they offer us two main ideas. Luke 16 is one of those "double-edged" parables. Only Luke tells us this story about a rich man and a poor beggar. It is a masterpiece of storytelling.

So what are the two main points of this parable? First, the reversal of fortune. In this life the rich man dined sumptuously dressed in purple and fine linen. He hardly noticed that ragged man covered in sores at his gate. He didn't see the dogs lick the beggar's wounds. And he certainly did nothing to help Lazarus, not even offer him the crumbs off his table. He was too busy feasting.

Eventually, both the rich man and Lazarus die. The poor man is carried by angels to rest in Abraham's bosom. The rich man finds himself in torment. Old Jewish and even Egyptian folklore traditions are at work here. These intermediate states of the dead are within shouting distance of each other. That's how you know it is a folktale.

So the rich man begs Abraham to send Lazarus to give him water for his scorching tongue. But Father Abraham reminds the rich man that a great reversal has taken place. While Lazarus suffered in this life, he will be comforted in the life to come. While the rich man had much in this life, he will receive his just desserts in the life to come. And a great chasm stands between them, never to be bridged. The judgment is irreversible.

That's the first point. An uncaring heart will face accountability. But the poor will be comforted. The parable becomes a solemn warning to the "haves" to care about the "have nots". But that is not the only point of this parable. There is a second that is probably even more crucial.

It concerns the bargaining that ensues. The rich man begs Father Abraham to send Lazarus to his five brothers to warn them. He fears his brothers will someday share in his torment if they persist in their indifference. Perhaps Lazarus could go to them in the form of a dream or a vision to awaken them. Think of Charles Dickens' "Christmas Carol" where the vision of Christmas Past, Present and Future confronts Ebenezer Scrooge.

Once again, the rich man's request is turned down. Father Abraham says simply, "They have Moses and the prophets; they

should listen to them.” Again, the rich man pleads: “But if someone goes to them from the dead, surely they will repent.” And then Father Abraham pronounces the final word: “If they won’t listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone rises from the dead.” And so the rich man, whose every request was granted in this life, has none of his three requests granted in the life to come.

The second part of this parable is of particular concern for us. One scholar has suggested that this parable has been wrongly entitled the Rich Man and Lazarus. It should be entitled the Parable of the Six Brothers. Why? Because the issue is this: “What will motivate six rather self-absorbed brothers who have it all to care about the beggar at their gate?” What moves us to actually care about others, especially those close at hand, those we can help? Jesus famously said, “The poor you always have with you, and whenever you will, you can do good to them” (Mk 14: &)

The operative phrase is “whenever you will”. Whenever you choose to see the needy and whenever you find it within your heart to care, then you can do something, especially for those near at hand, at your gates. The rich man in torment is convinced that someone from the dead could startle his five brothers out of their

indifference. And by the way, that is how Charles Dickens tells the story of Ebenezer Scrooge, the crotchety old man scared to death into a changed life.

So Father Abraham notes that all the rich brothers were unmoved by Moses and the prophets. Who is to say that someone from the dead would motivate them to care? Take note that the poor beggar is named Lazarus. He is the only named character in all of Jesus' parables. That seems significant. Remember Lazarus figures prominently in the Gospel of John. He is a close friend of Jesus and the brother of Mary and Martha from Bethany.

This Lazarus dies and is resuscitated by Jesus. He comes back from the dead. And the Gospel of John reports the response of the people to this momentous sign. Because of Lazarus many did believe in Jesus. But this amazing sign also hardened the hearts of Jesus' enemies. As a result of this sign, they intensified their efforts to kill Jesus. And his enemies also plotted to kill Lazarus as well.

So bringing someone back from the dead did not convince his hardened opponents. Nor did Jesus' own resurrection convince those who would not believe. That is what Father Abraham is saying. Those who do not have "eyes to see" or "ears to hear" will not be convinced even if a miracle happens before their very eyes. They

simply attributed Jesus' power to the work of a demon. And so it goes. We see what we want to see and hear what we want to hear. This is spiritual blindness at its worst.

So receptive hearts are called for. And what makes us receptive? What induces us to care and to act? Would it take a vision of Christmas Past, Present and Future? Or a Word of the Lord in Scripture? Or someone appearing to us from the dead? That is the crucial question in the Parable of the Six Brothers.

During college I read a great novel by Hermann Hesse entitled "Siddhartha." It was my first real exposure to Buddhism. You may remember the story of Siddhartha, born a prince in what is today Nepal, in the lower Himalaya Mountains. Within a week of birth his mother died. His father, the king, asked an aunt to help raise the infant.

Legend has it that a great sage noticed special marks on the child's body. This indicated that the boy would someday become an illustrious person. The priests foretold that the child would become either a great king or a great teacher. Siddhartha's father wanted his son to succeed him as ruler.

So the king enforced strict measures to shield the boy from exposure to suffering. Raised in a large walled palace, young

Siddhartha grew up in the lap of luxury. Married at an early age to a woman chosen by his father, the couple had a son. Siddhartha was trained and educated as a warrior prince, all in splendid isolation.

One day the twenty-nine-year-old Siddhartha, for reasons shrouded in mystery, disobeyed his father's command. He left the royal compound and visited the nearby village. Here for the first time in his life, he saw suffering. Intense human suffering.

In Buddhist tradition this is called the "Four Passing Sights." First, he saw an old man, crooked and toothless. Second, he saw a sick man, wasted by disease. Third, he saw a corpse being taken for cremation. Fourth and finally, he saw a wandering holy man without possessions who seemed to be at peace.

These "Four Passing Sights" sent Siddhartha into a deep depression. He realized that he had been held captive in an opulent prison. The suffering he saw prompted him to question the meaning of his existence. He wondered if his whole life up to that point had been an elaborate effort to shield him from suffering and death. And so he decided to leave his protected enclave to seek enlightenment.

The rest, as they say, is history. Siddhartha finally experienced a spiritual awakening under the Bodhi Tree and so is called the Buddha, the enlightened one. He came to understand that suffering

is part and parcel of life. But he offered a way out of such suffering, by ending our attachments to things and desires and especially our attachment to self. This is the heart of Buddhist teaching and philosophy.

There is something crucial for us as Christians in this story. It says to us that someone of great privilege can be moved by the sufferings of others. The “Four Passing Sights” forever changed Siddhartha. If only the six brothers could have been so moved by Lazarus at their gate! If only we could be so moved by what we see, what we hear, what we experience.

It was not someone returned from the dead that changed Siddhartha. It was not the Law and the prophets or the parables. It was seeing real human suffering and death. It was really seeing and feeling human suffering that changed him. And that is the real miracle. How one person can come back from the death of indifference to taste real life, authentic life. And that is my prayer for us all this day. May we all be awakened to see, truly see, the Lazarus at our gate. And may we truly begin to live, life that is life indeed in Christ our risen Lord. Amen.