

Sunday, September 25, 2022, The Third Sunday of Creation

The Rev. Kit Wang

O God, you declare your almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity: Grant us the fullness of your grace, that we, running to obtain your promises, may become partakers of your heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

When I read today's Gospel during Bible study this week, the phrase that jumped out at me was the rich man telling Abraham to "Send Lazarus."

When I hear this parable, I am always stunned by the hubris and privilege of the rich man who likely stepped over Lazarus when the rich man passed through his gates into the world asking for Lazarus to care for him. The parable makes it clear that the rich man took no care or notice of Lazarus when they lived as neighbors, and now, he sees Lazarus as a tool for his comfort.

I confess, my mind raced from "Send Lazarus," to the news in recent weeks of migrants at the southern borders being sent northward to someone else's front gate, and from there to the "reverse freedom rides" of the Civil Rights Era when Southern whites of means sent African Americans northward with promises of jobs, housing, and meetings with President Kennedy.

And then, I confess, I wondered when—and why—the text had changed such that Lazarus was merely by Abraham's side, and not in Abraham's bosom, as I recall the text. (And a Sunday School and summer camp song!) Much rich and important imagery is lost in this gap! I wonder what we lose when this imagery gets actually lost in translation?

As we have been taking a deep dive into the Parables in Luke during this long green growing season, I have been reading along in Dr. Amy-Jill Levine's excellent commentary on the parables, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*. Dr. Levine is professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies at Vanderbilt University and Vanderbilt Divinity School. I commend her work to you, particularly the sermon she preached at Washington National Cathedral on March 7, 2021 about issues with Anti-Semitism and cultural misunderstandings about Judaism in the Episcopal Lectionary <https://cathedral.org/sermons/sermon-dr-amy-jill-levine/>

She has also contributed commentary to the Episcopal Church on the proposed revision of the Good Friday Passion reading.

Professor Levine's commentary on the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus is lengthy and insightful. She challenges us to look at this parable NOT as an allegory but as a parable grounded in the economic, social, and religious realities of Jesus's day, challenging the commentators who have claimed that the parable is NOT about the afterlife, and NOT about the social, religious, and economic realities of the day. (Ch 9, The Rich Man and Lazarus)

Professor Levine reminds us that the Rich Man goes to Hades not just because he is rich and extravagant, but because he is rich, extravagant, and heedless of the needs of his neighbor, Lazarus, lying at his gate, as not only required, but demanded by Torah, that is, Jewish law and practice.

The rich man is condemned, not merely for his wealth, but because he does not use any of his resources toward either God or neighbor, AND because he persists in treating Lazarus not as a person, but as a tool, an "it."

Our text from I Timothy reminds us that money is the root of all kinds of evil, which complements the Gospel Parable, and invokes last week's message that we cannot serve both God and Wealth.

The Rich Man in the parable is VERY rich. Unapproachably rich. And Lazarus is terribly impoverished and unwell. And we are all likely somewhere in between. So what do we need to take away from this parable?

In the parables, Jesus invites his hearers—and therefore us—to do at least two things. One is to examine our priorities in the light of the Gospel, and the other is to interrogate (or be interrogated by) the story. Which is a longwinded way of asking how the parable causes us to question our priorities and practices regarding our behavior toward God, neighbor, and self. As well as what other questions the parable brings up.

This is a parable where the Godly Play wondering question: I wonder what part of the parable is about you, or where you are in the parable? is certainly appropriate.

It's appropriate to wonder when and how we have overlooked the person lying at our gate—whether deliberately or inadvertently.

A couple of Sundays back, before the service started, I walked over to greet a friend who I hadn't seen in a few weeks. In my rush to greet her, I completely overlooked her young daughter who was VERY quick to catch my eye and greet me with some enthusiasm. And, wow, I still find myself wondering what that was about. SO NOT like me to overlook a child.

Back to where I began this morning. It is SO easy, so tempting to make this parable about THEM! But Jesus told these stories so that his hearers, we who hear this story, might wonder about what part we have in them, so I would ask us to consider the same.

The rich man asks for Lazarus to be sent to warn his brothers, reinforcing the chasm between them by attempting to exert his privilege to get Lazarus to rescue them, but Abraham tells him it is futile if they already don't heed the religious and cultural values in their lives.

Whom of our neighbors and stranger in our midst do we need to be reminded to love and care for?

Do we, somewhere in the middle ground between the Rich man and Lazarus, desire the rich man's menu or wardrobe? Do we fear being too close for comfort to Lazarus's straits? How do these feelings—or others—inform our priorities? Are we too comfortable with the torment of the rich man?

This is not a story about works righteousness. It is not about "earning" our way to heaven through good works. It is about upholding our part in the covenant by caring for the sick, friendless, and needy. In person, in real time.

Amen.

#### Sources and Resources:

[The Reverse Freedom Rides And Their Long Aftermath : Code Switch : NPR](#)

[Dr. Amy-Jill Levine at Washington National Cathedral 7 March 2021](#)

Levine, Amy-Jill, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, Chapter 9

[Dr. Amy-Jill Levine, Testimony before the House of Deputies TEC 2/19/2022](#)