

Going In Through The Door

Luke 16:19-31

July 22, 2012

I.

Many years ago I went to 4-H camp each summer. It mostly was for kids who lived on farms. While there, we sang a lot of songs, and one of them was, "Rocka my soul in the bosom of Abraham." Popular versions later were recorded by Elvis, and Peter, Paul, and Mary, as well as several others groups and singers.

That song was taken from today's biblical account of Lazarus resting in Abraham's arms. And the great chasm between Lazarus and the rich man was memorialized in its refrain. You might remember that catchy part that proclaimed, "So high you can't get over it, so wide you can't get around it, so low you can't get under it, you must go in through the door."

And going in through the door is one of the principal points of this reading. Let's start at the beginning and see how we get there, And we will review this quickly because after I finish, our Senior Warden, Lynda Gilmore, will briefly speak with us about the Vestry's plan to complete our budget for this year.

We all have seen modern-day versions of Lazarus, haven't we? Perhaps he was sleeping on some newspapers in an alley in Gulfport. Or he could have been crouched beside a fire under a bridge in New Orleans. If the deputies haven't sent him on his way he might be standing at Exit 16 with a cardboard sign and a cup as we get off to come home.

Today's story about Lazarus and the rich man offers an opportunity to talk about those around us who barely survive on the margins of life. It opens as a story about the rich and the poor, and those who have and those who do not.

And a sermon on that subject today could use Jesus as a model. It could point out that while he died to save us all, he lived to help the poor and needy. And it might conclude by calling us to follow his example and extend his love to others in our community.

You have heard me preach sermons like that in the past, and I am confident that you take them to heart. In fact, I know that you all are generous and caring enough that you would help people in need even if I did not preach about it.

And here at St. Thomas we do help people. Several needy families come to the church each week for assistance. We support the Hancock County Food Pantry. Next Saturday we will be working with Hope Haven Children's Services to help kids get ready for school. Our Angel Tree program means a lot to children at Christmas. And there are other examples.

But the real message of today's reading is not in how the story begins with a contrast between the rich and poor in Jesus' time, but rather in how it ends with a contrast between faith and unbelief in every age.

II.

The reading has three parts. The first described an unnamed rich man who lived in luxury and splendor, and a pathetic soul named Lazarus who hung around the rich man's gate with sores on his body that were licked by dogs.

And I should mention that this was not Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, whom Jesus raised from the dead. Lazarus was a common name in first century Palestine. Also, dogs were

not usually household pets at the time, but were mostly wild and unclean. So this is not an image of a warm friendly puppy soothing Lazarus' pain, but rather something more ominous.

Then the second part of the reading describes a reversal of fortune with the rich man suffering in Hades, and Lazarus resting in Paradise with Abraham. But we don't know why they ended up where they did after they died. The reading does not say that the rich man ignored Lazarus; only that he was rich. And it does not say that Lazarus was a man of faith; only that he was poor.

And everything in the reading up to this point was designed to set the stage, which was completed by the imagery of a great uncrossable chasm between Lazarus being comforted by Abraham and the rich man in torment.

This leads to the third and concluding part in which the actual plot begins to develop during conversations between Abraham and the rich man across that eternal gulf.

And before we go further I should note that Jesus did not condemn wealth in this reading. Wealth is not a sin. In fact, during his life Abraham was a very wealthy man, and he was in Heaven. The issue does not relate to having wealth, but rather how it is used.

III.

So let's pick up the plot with the rich man pleading to Abraham. And we should not assume that conversations between people in Heaven and Hell literally could happen, or that people in one place actually can see people in the other. We will not know any of those details in this life. Jesus simply told the story in this way in order to make a point.

As the rich man began speaking, he did not disagree with his fate. He did not suggest that a mistake had not been made. Instead he expressed concern for his five surviving brothers, who apparently also were living in unrighteous ways. He wanted them to be able to repent and avoid the torment of Hades while there still was time for them.

So he asked Abraham to send Lazarus from Heaven to his brothers to warn them about whatever it was they were doing or not doing that needed to be changed. And Abraham's response brings us to the crux of the story.

Abraham saw no need to send Lazarus back into the world, and pointed out that the brothers already had Moses and the prophets to guide them. And, of course, the term "Moses and the prophets" as it was used during Jesus' time was another way of referring to Holy Scripture. According to Abraham that would be sufficient.

But look at what happened next. The rich man was not at all confident that his brothers would just suddenly start reading Scripture. He knew them too well. They would need persuasion; something dramatic. So he again told Abraham that someone, such as Lazarus, would have to go to his brothers from the dead in order to really get their attention.

And Abraham still did not buy it. He said that if the brothers' faith did not lead them to read Scripture on their own in order to learn God's will for his people, they would not be convinced if someone rose from the dead to tell them.

Now we're getting there. This is the objective of Jesus' teaching. People are called to know and respect the truth and authority of Scripture. And if some, like the rich man's brothers, reject that authority then they, as Abraham said, will not be convinced even if someone returns from the dead to tell them.

This was not a good outcome for the five brothers. But we are more fortunate, aren't we? We have an advantage the rich man's brothers did not have. Jesus Christ can do for us what no one else could have done for the rich man's brothers.

Scripture tells us that Jesus rose from the dead to assure us of eternal life in God's presence, but that if we do not believe it then we do not receive it. It also tells us to trust in God's Word, and live in God's will. And we have to do the former in order to be able to do the latter.

IV.

And so this story about worldly wealth and poverty resolves itself into a teaching about spiritual wealth and poverty. It shows that the wealth found in Scripture is more enduring than wealth derived from the world.

But it is not an "either/or" situation. Worldly and spiritual wealth do not have to be in conflict, even though they certainly can be in tension. God blesses us and gives us wealth. In fact, there is a website, www.globalrichlist.com, which claims that you can key in your annual income and see exactly where you rank in the world's population.

And other data shows that an average family of two in Mississippi has a household income greater than 98% of the world. Average income in Diamondhead is even higher. Those are good things. God wants us to prosper and be well.

But he also wants us to honor him in return, and to serve his purposes first so that we can more faithfully serve ourselves and each other. And so while today's Gospel began as a commentary on the social problems of wealth and poverty, it concluded as a commentary on the spiritual discipline of following Scripture to use our resources and blessings as God intends.

Earlier I mentioned an old familiar Gospel song about resting in the bosom of Abraham in the context of the great uncrossable chasm between Heaven and Hell described in today's reading.

That is the meaning of today's reading. We are responsible in the hereafter for what we do in the here and now. And there is no way to avoid it. It is too high to get over, too wide to get around, and too low to get under. We must go in through the door.

And we know where that door is, don't we? It is found by knowing and trusting God's Word, which leads us to worship the Lord and care for each other. And when we do that, we respond in faith to God for the blessings he in his grace has given us. *Amen.*