

2025 03 30 Christ Collides with our Selfishness

[Luke 16:19-33](#) - The Rich Man and the Poor Man

This sermon does not end (although, for logistical reasons, it will conclude at the appointed hour).

Over Lent we are hearing several of the parables that Jesus taught. A parable is a particular form of story that includes a surprise, a twist, or which subverts expectations. It uses familiar images and stock figures but does something new with them. The word parable implies throwing together different elements to see what happens when they collide. Let's listen to a parable that Jesus told, trying to notice what is familiar, what is surprising, and what provokes your imagination.

JS reads Luke 16:19-33.

PH - let's talk about Hell. I'd love to do a "Rizoli Method" whole-church Bible study and invite everyone's ideas, but on the point of Hell, I'd like to be a bit directive... **this is not a parable about Hell**. Anymore than the Prodigal is a parable about swine herding practices in ancient Palestine. Or perhaps you heard that the story Jesus told about the Camel going through the Eye of the Needle actually is about a gate in Jerusalem. It's tempting to try and tame the imagery of a parable, but that risks missing the point.

This parable has sometimes been understood as a description of life after death. Theologians have tried to make it work together with the rare afterlife mentions in the Bible, and there are many different beliefs about what happens after we die.

The standard Christian belief is that when your body dies, a part of you called your soul goes to another realm. At some point, you are judged, and either go to a place of exile from God, and that is called hell, or into God's embrace, which is called heaven. Some people think that the judgement is based entirely on whether you accepted Jesus in your life, others think it is more about whether you lived a good or bad life.

In his parable, Jesus is referencing a form of the afterlife which began to be referenced a few centuries before his time. It is quite different to the standard Christian teachings about heaven and hell - and notice that neither heaven or hell are mentioned, and neither is God or a moment of judgement. During his life on earth Jesus never heard the Christian doctrines of heaven and hell, and if he taught it, none of the Gospel writers thought it was important enough to include in their records.

I'm trying to suggest that Jesus is not trying to teach people about the afterlife. I think he is using an idea that his original audience would be familiar with in order to tell a new story. Jesus describes a shepherd leaving 99 sheep to look for one lost sheep, and we don't imagine that he is quoting from the shepherd handbook. Parables are not statements of fact or absolute reality. They tell the truth through images.

The parable form assumes that the audience is familiar enough with the setting that they can listen out for what is different. But I don't think we are familiar with this setting. I think a lot of us grew up with grisly tales about eternal fire and punishment. We may have heard that we deserve this punishment. You may have been told that you deserve this punishment, either in general or for specific reasons. These stories confuse our ideas of God and make God into an angry father who is sending you to eternal time out because you didn't clean your room. It's good to clean your room, but not as a way to avoid punishment. This is not a parable about Hell. God does not want you to go to Hell, and I do not want you to be in Hell (*in your mind, soul, self*).

We can't hear this parable if our minds are full of scary meanings that don't belong with this story. The setting and the incident of a parable may be provocative and gripping, but it is not what we are meant to think about at the end. We are invited to think about the people in the parable. The people in parables are where the listeners are called in, or called out.

So, with all that said, we are going to read this parable again.

JS - reads Luke 16:19-33 a second time

Second time through, perhaps we hear things differently. Could you sense some of the surprises and unexpected twists? I found myself picturing how we would act this out on a stage. Use your imagination, let's make it gorgeous - on one side of the stage is Lazarus, ragged and wretched, lying on the ground eating a discarded Happy Meal. On the other side, is a faceless corporate oligarch lounging on a beanbag chair, ordering UberEats. His delivery driver must step over Lazarus to pass through the gate that separates them.

And then they both die, and the angels come - perhaps stage hands, dressed in black. Both men stay lying where they are, but the staging shifts around them. Suddenly, the rich man is stuck inside a burning building, and Lazarus is lying beside a beautiful, utterly impassable chasm, and he is not surrounded by dogs and rats but by his ancestors who embrace him and comfort him. Once, Lazarus was looking up at the house, hungry, while the rich man was glued to his phone. Now the rich man is looking out at Lazarus who is busy with a family party.

It's funny, or ironic, or something - it's a classic reversal of fortune and the serving of just desserts. By itself, that would be enough of a story - why is there injustice in the world today - why are the poor downtrodden and the rich run governments? Why do some people have two houses and some people have no houses? The answer seems to be that everything will be reversed in the afterlife - which in some ways is a very satisfying answer, and in other ways is not satisfying at all.

But this is not the parable, this is just the set up.

This parable only appears in the Gospel of Luke, and is the only parable where individuals are named. In all other parables people are simply named as baker, farmer, or builder. Of the two men who are being compared here, only the poor man receives a name. Jesus sets up the joke early on. Lazarus is being humanised in a way he was not humanised in life. Last week a friend of mine who works at a drop in shared a story from someone who said they like coming to the drop in, because once a week someone calls them by their name.

The joke continues - this parable was very popular in Christian history, and the rich man was quickly given a name. Narrative abhors a vacuum

- and readers apparently felt like it was necessary to humanise the rich man. But I'm going to stick with how Jesus told it.

The way Jesus told it, the rich man begs Abraham to send Lazarus back from the dead to warn his five brothers - apparently just as rich and as incapable of perceiving as he was. I wonder what emotion Jesus used to tell that part of the story. I wonder if the rich man was speaking as one rich man to another, used to giving orders and having a servant obey them. Is he caught in his way of thinking? Or is his cascading sequence of requests about something else? Is he accepting his lot, and beginning to turn his attention to how others can have a better outcome than him?

The title chosen for this week in our current series is 'Christ collides with our selfishness'. Who is being selfish in this parable? Despite being a named individual, Lazarus never says or does anything. In one translation, he is 'brought to the gate' of the rich man's house, and later the angels come and carry him away somewhere else. The only verb associated with him is longing - for food. By the end of the story, it is the rich man who is longing - first for relief from his pain, but then for relief for other people.

The parable uses the language of wealth and poverty, but that is not the heart of the story. What is the human story in this parable? What are you provoked into considering as you listen to it being told?

JS - reads Luke 16:19-33 for the third time.

Who here knows the song 'All Things Bright and Beautiful?' Take a look at #177 in your hymnals if you need a reminder. I was thinking of singing a little bit of it, but my husband reminded me that I learned it to a different tune than most of you, and I don't want to inflict that on you in the same week that we talked about Hell.

It is a lovely hymn that focuses on the beauty and diversity of the created world, and God's love underneath everything. It's simple and cheerful. I learned it as a school hymn, not at church, and today it is widely known in Britain. The United Church of Canada's hymnal has a special verse which describes the Canadian landscape, and I think it's a

pity that it didn't make it into Voices Together. When my grandmother died, I wrote a verse for her funeral to represent her years of living in Nigeria and Botswana, knowing that all of my cousins and their children who aren't as familiar with hymns would be able to sing this one. Because everyone knows the hymn, you can innovate within it, and say something new - which again, is the underlying structure of a parable.

But did you know that there is a secret missing verse? The original third verse, which was cancelled by the woke liberals of the 1950s is no longer printed in any hymnal:

The rich man in his castle,
The poor man at his gate,
God made them, high or lowly,
And ordered their estate.

It turns out that the author of this hymn didn't restrict her observations to the flowers and mountains, but also considered human hierarchy to be a creation of God, intended, and ordained. The rich were meant to rule, and the poor were meant to stay outside the gates.

Appropriately enough, this verse was removed a long time ago. It came to my mind because it takes the exact scene described in the beginning of the parable, where Lazarus is lying at the gate of the rich man's house, and claims: 'yes, this is how God meant it to be'.

There is a lot to be said about the author, her other works, and what may have influenced her writing this. But obliquely and unconsciously she did it, this verse is a third remixing of the story. She took a somewhat familiar image, and reworked it to make a theological claim, a claim that we now reject.

We are now at the end of this sermon, but we are not at the heart of it. I have already shared with you the questions that I am left with - who is selfish in this story? Who grows and learns, and who remains passive? The parables of Jesus remain sharp and discomfiting. The Bible does not set out to give us clear answers. If you want a clear answer about the afterlife, or about wealth and poverty, or about human suffering, there are other religions with a clearer message, and even other forms of

Christianity that will give you your answer, if that is what your question needs.

Jesus does not direct an answer. Jesus invites a response.

I wanted to end the way I began, by looking at the ways this story can be used. At the beginning I said that this is not a parable about the afterlife, although we need to take it seriously when people are concerned about the afterlife. I'd like to wrap up by saying that this is not a parable about poverty and wealth, although we need to take these matters seriously, since systems of power and wealth exist alongside the matters of personal responsibility and ethical living.

Alongside questions of power and wealth are questions about where people look for authority and teaching. In the parable Abraham claims that even someone coming back from the dead will not be enough to convince anyone of the need for economic justice and restructuring towards a common wealth.

This conclusion is borne out in the simple telling of the Christian story - the mystery of faith - that Jesus came back from the dead, and that we are still struggling with the implications. This parable makes a remarkable claim for Christians - that the teachings of the Jewish people through the law of Moses and the words of the prophets are enough. Jesus did not consider himself to be rejecting, correcting, or abolishing them. He built his teachings on them, and asks us to build our lives on his teachings.

Jesus teaches us with parables that cause us to question. Our questions invite transformation towards a heart that yearns for the wellbeing of others, a mind that challenges unjust barriers, and an embodied participation in a rooted community where we grow towards God.

There's no conclusion to this sermon. It just keeps going.