

Long Live Lazarus!

Gospel of Luke 16:19-31

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"There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Laz'arus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Laz'arus by his side. He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Laz'arus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Laz'arus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.' He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house-- for I have five brothers--that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.' Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.' He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"

Gospel of Luke 16:19-31, NRSV

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Laz'arus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores.

I have to tell you that it took almost every piece, every morsel, every iota of my better judgment to resist the temptation, in light of the hateful fodder fueling the agenda of this past week's House of Bishops meeting in New Orleans, not to respond this morning to *some* of the privileged men in fine purple shirts who feast sumptuously on the hallmarks and hospitality of their/our tradition, as the marginalized outcasts, abominations, as a few of the African Bishops have called we whose sexual orientation differs from their notion of the norm, wait at the royal ecclesiastical gate for an invitation to enter God's banquet and God's service.....

But fortunately for us all, this morning's Gospel calls me in a different direction. And it is yet another story from the lips of our Savior that begins, "There was a rich man...." Another story that seems to pit my growing love for the Bible and its wisdom against some of the most fundamental lessons and principles that were central to my upbringing and young adult formation. Another story that seems to make the confusing suggestion that anyone who strives to "succeed" in this world, who works to achieve the "American dream," who hopes to accomplish a degree of self-sufficiency and material well being, is doomed to....well, just doomed. Another story that suggests that the world's injustice for so many....is just not fair to the rest of us! And yet, there is no implication of

guilt in this morning's reading from the Gospel of Luke. No one is at fault for anyone else's situation. The good-fortune of the rich man is not blamed for the ill-fortune of Lazarus. As a bit of an aside, I think that it is not insignificant that in this story, the rich man is a generic character and the poor man, Lazarus that is, is named, and therefore claimed, by Jesus. Likewise, there is a clear cut illustration that those who *have now* will *have not* later, and those who *do not have now* will *have* the kingdom of God forever more.

This is another story that backs up the beatitudes, which is Latin for blessed. You know, we all know, the ones who are blessed: *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn...Blessed are the meek... Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...Blessed are the merciful... Blessed are the pure I heart... Blessed are the peacemakers...etc., etc., etc.*

This is the official list of the ones who, like Lazarus, will inherit the earth...the ones who, like Lazarus, will receive the mercy...the ones who will see God...who will be called children of God... who will live their everlasting lives in the kingdom of heaven....These are the winners, if you will, in the eternal realm of God. These are, like Lazarus, winners in the long run....winners in heaven.

But we must admit, from our particular 21st century Western cultural perspective, these folks don't sound too much like winners, or at least our definition of such. When was the last time that the description of the life our parents hoped for us, or the life that represents the *American* ideal, included the word meek? Or mournful? Or poor in spirit? Or hungry? Or thirsty? Or persecuted? And even the ones that might at first glance seem theoretically commendable – the merciful, the pure of heart, and the peacemakers – even they are seen in our culture as wimps and winges, the suckers and the softies, the ones who will be walked on, stepped over, and pushed aside in our 21st century Western world where the ideal seems to be defined by ascending levels of power and popularity and privilege.

And even for those of us who *do not* subscribe to that unbridled ideal, who *do* value justice and peace and love, we were taught, at least I was taught, that those are things that I should and must pursue and promote after I have secured my own self-sustenance and stability in this world. That is to say, first and foremost, I am responsible for myself. I am not directly responsible for anyone else – outside of my immediate family. But it is absolutely my job to make sure that I do not end up like...Lazarus. And, that while I am expected to share my wealth and to put my resources to work for God's purposes, I am not ultimately *responsible* for the life of anyone's but my own.

Further, God *expects* me to succeed in this world, to excel with the gifts I have been given. God wants me to be at least self-supported, and if at all possible, well-supported. God wants me to be a winner in this world. Not at the expense or to the exclusion of anyone else, but to live up to my potential, which after all is given by God. That is why I *have* so many advantages, so many privileges, so many gifts. Therefore, it is my duty and my calling to do well in this world. This is God's sacred charge to me.... and to you. And it is our responsibility from our Creator.....or so I, and I suspect some of you, were raised to believe.

And so these Gospel passages about poor Lazarus and the beatitudes have historically left me somewhat confused. What is Jesus saying? How can Lazarus be seen as the ideal? Despite this morning's Gospel warning, Lazarus is no one to whom we would actually aspire. No one to whom we would point as a role model for our children. And yet Lazarus, just by being Lazarus, is the one who hits the jackpot of eternal life. Is this our proper goal? To end up like Lazarus?

I don't know about you, but this story has always made me feel a bit left out. I am not ever, God willing, going to be Lazarus. And I am not ever, I fear, going to resemble the beatitudes. Those "virtues" don't seem to describe me in the least. Meek? I don't think so. Hungry or thirsty? Oh please. Pure of heart? Only in my dreams. And while I can see how this description of God's chosen ones might be the very rock upon which some folks, folks who are far less fortunate than I am, have built their hopes and their dreams and their faith, Lazarus and the beatitudes have always seemed to be just moot warnings that my privileged posterior will never make the glorious grade.

The other reason I have never particularly related to these Gospel readings is that I have never been wild about the timing of the reward. Treasure in heaven doesn't seem like much of a selling point to me. I am the poster child for instant gratification. Perhaps you can relate. Most of the time, we who are relatively well off are perfectly willing, and in fact delighted, to concede a better seat in the afterlife to Lazarus who has reaped such a raw deal in this one. In fact, sometimes we are actually grateful that there is a light at the end of his miserable tunnel. Because then we don't have to worry about him, really. We don't have to worry about the injustice of his situation, at least not in an overly painful, sacrificial way. We don't have Lazarus on our daily conscience, for **he** will be playing on the field of dreams when he shuffles off this mortal coil, and **we** will be sleeping under the bleachers.....which, much of the time, seems more than fair to the likes of me.

For this knowledge acts as a sort of spiritual tax shelter. Because it means that we can keep on doing what we are doing, confident in the moral comfort that God will ensure justice...we can relax and reap our earthly reward because God will even the score in the end. And we are more than willing

to trade treasure in heaven for peace-of-mind on this earth, almost any day of the week...maybe because heaven seems so far off.

And still these readings about Lazarus and the beatitudes bother me. Why do they not seem to apply to me? Why can't I find myself and my own story of salvation in these pivotal Gospel readings? What do they have to say to the likes of me, and us, in light of our 21st century American culture...in light of our ingrained sense of self-responsibility and self-determination...in light of the realities of our context? What do they have to say about the way we are to make *meaning* of our lives?

This past week, two of my neighbors, both good friends, lost their beloved canine companions. One was euthanized to preclude impending suffering from a tumor, and the other was hit by a car and returned to God on the spot. As you might imagine, both losses were deeply felt. And as I watched my friends and their brokenhearted children grieve, I could not help but remember my own first experience with such loss. Not a parent or a child or a sibling, but the purest love that I had ever known. Five years ago I lost my six year old golden retriever Rosie, the first creature I had raised, and thus known, from her birth. She permeated my life with utter joy and unconditional acceptance. And despite the several human losses that that had marked my path to that date, I could not ever before remember feeling the unbearable emptiness, the unspeakable sadness, the unfathomable helplessness that I felt in the deepest recesses of my being the night she died, and that I can still feel now as I stand before and beside you. One minute she was a part of my very heartbeat, and the next minute she was gone. How could my heart beat on?

That night, as I knelt in front of the intensive care crib at Angell Memorial Hospital where my sweet Rosie lay deteriorating from the complications of three grueling hours of brain surgery, I watched her sink slowly from this realm. She was quietly, weakly crying, actually yelping, for some small relief from the mystifying nightmare...as I knelt there I was so desperately torn between not wanting to lose her light in my life – for who besides Rosie would or could love me no matter what ... and so deeply *loving* her that I could not bear to see one more second of suffering in her eyes, even if that meant losing her presence in my days. As I knelt and looked at that precious creature through the plexiglas window of her crib, I saw something that stopped me in my tracks.

For I saw the most meek....the most mournful...the most poverty stricken spirit I had ever seen. I saw a hunger for mercy and a thirst for peace, and a pureness of heart that were, to my tremendous surprise, embodied.....in the window's reflection of me.

Meek, mournful, grieving me. Hungry for mercy. Thirsty, parched in fact, for a morsel of peace or comfort. Underneath all of my learning, all of my training, all of my accomplishment and my acquisition...at the bottom of my well, where all my earthly accoutrements had been drained and all of my earthly desires reduced to compassion alone...I realized for the first time that *I am* the meek...*I am* the mournful...*I am* the hungry...*I am* the blessed. I am Lazarus. Underneath it all, I am at one, not at odds, with God beloveds.

Blessed are we who make it back to the beings...the gentle, merciful, peace-loving beings that we were born to be...that God has called us to be, that we were created to *be*. Lazarus is a description of who we are, fundamentally, each one of us, at our very core. Lazarus is the promise that we do not have to make anything of ourselves in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. We have already been granted admission. Lazarus is our pudding and our proof.

I have spent a great deal of my life *doing* what I thought I was *meant to do*; looking to *make* meaning of my life; *doing* things that I thought would *make* me a success, *working* my way closer to God, as if those were the key to the pearly gates. But that night at Angell Memorial, stripped of every earthly concern save the purest love my heart could hold, I realized that I will never *find* meaning in this life. I will never be able to *make* this life a success. No amount of readiness or riches will *make* life mean more, for **we do not make meaning, we give it**. *We give* meaning to this life, *we are* the meaning in this life. That is not to say that we should ditch our material lives and live as homeless paupers, but that we must stop identifying ourselves as anything more or less than Lazarus, as anything more or less than the purest heart that is the core of our being.

Even though Abraham would not let Lazarus come back to warn the rich man's five brothers, Jesus has given us the lowdown in today's Gospel reading. And the warning, I think, is not *to be poor*, but *to be pure* – and not in an exclusive, or morally self-righteous sort of way; but to be pure in an honest, stripped to our very core, essentially meaningful sort of way. In today's Gospel reading, Jesus hands us the keys to the kingdom. For it is ours but to *realize* that we were born to be Lazarus, welcomed into God's kingdom from the very get-go...and the pureness of heart that we seek so desperately *to find*, is in fact the only thing we have ever had *to offer*.

Long live Lazarus!

Amen.

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