

Sermon *Lazarus and the Rich Man*
The Very Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels 9.28.25

Amos 6:1a,4-7
Psalm 146
1 Timothy 6:6-19
Luke 16:19-31

One of the critiques of Jesus and his message is that he does not talk enough about heaven and what happens when we die. He of all people would know but instead the message captured in the four gospel accounts primarily focus on how to live in this life. Today, however, we have one of those rare stories where he does talk about the other side.

Before I get into that, I'd like to go out on a limb – unlike many theologians, I do not think the story of Lazarus and the Rich Man is a parable. I think it's an actual story and, as such, we should treat it that way. There was a man named Lazarus, who was poor, and there was a rich man. They both died. Let's treat it as a literal story and not a parable.

Why I disagree with the assertion that it is a parable is that it doesn't follow the parabolic structure. First, the parables have outlandish or extreme characters. In the parable of the lost sheep, the shepherd leaves the 99 to go find the lost sheep. When he finds it, he walks through the center of town, announcing his find, and then throws a party. In reality, it's the job of a shepherd go find a lost sheep and, from what we understand about shepherding, seeking a lost sheep happens a lot. Yet, the parabolic structure shows the outlandishness of the behavior with a key teaching – this is like the celebration in heaven when one person repents. Similarly, with the woman who had ten coins, lost one, cleaned the house, found it and then invited everyone over to celebrate with her because what was lost has now been found... it's just like the celebration in heaven. And, my favorite parable of late that I've been doing a lot of thinking about is what I call *Two Jews Walk Into the Temple*. One man walks up to the front and thanks God for making him what he is and especially for not making him "like that other guy behind me". That "other guy" is in the back of the temple, beating his chest, and saying, "Have mercy on me Lord, a sinner." Jesus (in typical parabolic fashion) asks a rabbi-esque question: which of these two men went home happier? (Hint, it's the guy in the back because he's trusting in the Lord's mercy and not his own behavior)

In contrast, at the beginning of the story of Lazarus and at the end, Jesus does not set it up like a parable, does not have outlandish characters, and does not wrap it up with either a moral to the story or a question about God. Nope, it just starts and it ends. It's like he was talking about people he knew, and that the crowd also knew. They knew the name of the rich man, they knew he died, and (most likely) knew of the poor man Lazarus. That being said, let's jump into the story.

Luke wrote this story in Greek. I'm going to walk you through it and give you a greater sense of meaning. To start with, there was a (unnamed; which is rare for those days to not give the name of the rich man) rich man "who was dressed in purple and fine linen." In Greek, there was a rich man "who dressed himself in purple". Okay, what's the difference? In those days, royal officials

would be dressed in purple (usually a small scarf because purple was very expensive back then) to show their rank or position. This man “dressed himself” which means he was expressing his wealth and did not have rank or stature within the empire. It goes on, “he feasted sumptuously every day.” Better translation: he threw himself a party every day.

Just from this description, are you getting the idea of how the rich man acts. He dresses himself in purple and throws himself a daily party.

Luke goes on; “And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus.” Let’s focus on the verb “to lay” because English cannot accurately represent what Luke wrote. The Greek verb is “flung” and it has an on-going sense – flinged, flung and will-be-flinged. See, we just can’t do it. Imagine someone who makes a scene in a casino. Two security guards grab him by the collar and the belt and toss him out on the street through a side door and say, “Get out and stay out.” That’s the verb to describe Lazarus. Flung-out-and-stay-out. I’m spending a lot of time on this verb because I think the rest of the story hinges on it. So, keep reading.

Lazarus dies and, like the verb “flung” the angels (not bouncers) fling him up to heaven where he stays and will stay. Likewise, the rich man dies. In “Hades” – Greek mythology ruled by Pluto which is the underworld or world of the dead – he is in agony. Both men are in the land of the dead. One however is in paradise with Abraham (the father of the faith) the other is with Pluto in the underworld. The rich man sees Lazarus and Abraham and calls out – Father Abraham, send Lazarus to dip his finger in water and drip it on my tongue.

Let’s hold the story there. So, the rich man knows Lazarus’s name. More on this in a moment.

Abraham says no, it can’t be done. The rich man says to send Lazarus to his home because he has five brothers and they should be warned. Abraham says, “They have Moses and the prophets, they should listen to them...” and, in my mind’s eye, I hear the rich man interrupting Abraham with this: “No father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead they will repent.” Abraham replies: If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.

Thus ends the lesson.

Let’s loop back to the “to fling/flung” verb. Get out and stay out. The antonym is “come in, stay in.” Time and time again in the Hebrew Scriptures there is a message about caring for those in need – for the foreigner, for the oppressed, for the widow for the orphan, for the needy and sick. It’s repeated over and over – “Remember that you too once were a stranger and in need.” Yet the rich man, who knows Lazarus by name; knows he’s at his gate, yet has the repeating “flung” of get out and stay out. At any point, the rich man could have invited Lazarus in, or fed him, or had a servant clean his wounds... but no, he didn’t. Time and again he didn’t. If he didn’t listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will his brothers. This is why I believe that he interrupts Abraham to say “send Lazarus to them so that they will repent” because without this they will not listen to Moses or the prophets. Abraham then tells him, “Yeah no, since they won’t listen to Moses, they won’t be convinced if Lazarus returns from the dead.”

And that's where the story ends.

Where does the story begin with you? We finally have a story about what happens when we die. Hebrew Scriptures are all that are necessary for salvation. Listen to Moses and the prophets, do what is required, and paradise with Abraham awaits. It's also not a one-time thing – seeing someone in need and not helping them doesn't seem to land one in Hades. It's the get out/stay out principle of constantly turning one's back on someone in need and constantly turning one's back on Moses and the prophets.

One more Greek verb for you – agony. The rich man says he's in agony. Here's the deal: it's a self-inflicted agony. We have no word for it in English. Lazarus was “flung” and stayed out (was not allowed in). The rich man's agony was self-inflicted and on-going.

I don't need a show of hands, but have you ever put yourself into self-inflicted agony? I have. It's usually after I said something I shouldn't have and it's all I can think about. My mind gets caught into a loop where it is repeated over and over again. From this story, we can read into it that Hades is place of being stuck in self-inflicted agony.

The last part to look at is this: send Lazarus. The rich man just doesn't get it. He who dressed himself in purple clothing and threw daily parties for himself (and perhaps prayed, “Thank you God that I'm not like that other guy”) believes, looking up to paradise, that he can command Lazarus AND Abraham. “Send Lazarus”... have him to work to help me; and, if not me, how about my brothers. It's a command. He's in no position to command. Yet, there he is, without his purple clothing, still commanding.

Where is the good news in this story. Someone has risen from the dead and you and I have listened and (hopefully) repented. We're in the 21st century of people listening to the one who rose from the dead. We are the ones who are believing without seeing. Likewise, there are people today who are listening to Moses and the prophets. People who are helping others and doing the “come in and stay in” instead of the get out/stay out.

Jesus has opened the pathway for us to enter into paradise with him and Abraham. He has also opened a way for us to let go of the self-inflicted agony we put ourselves into. We can seek forgiveness, say we are sorry, and to be forgiven as we are forgiven. And, we don't have to send Lazarus to do any of that work. Our Lord and Savior, the one who came not to be served but to serve, has already made the way ready for us. Thanks be to God.