

The Gift of Enough

Isn't it interesting that so many jokes we tell are set at the Pearly Gates? You know, ten New Yorkers showed up at the Pearly Gates and St. Peter—he's always the main character—St. Peter had never seen that many New Yorkers all at the same time at the gates of Heaven. So he consulted with the Lord. We've got 10 New Yorkers at the Pearly Gates, Lord, what will we do?" The Lord says, "We just do what we always do." So, Peter goes back but when he gets there, they're gone. He races back to the Lord, and says, "You won't believe this, but they're gone!" The Lord says, "What the New Yorkers?" "No," says Peter, "The Pearly Gates!"

Okay, the great thing about Pearly Gates stories is that they always reflect in heaven what is going on on earth. And of course that's what makes these kinds of stories inexhaustible.

Now today we have a kind of Pearly Gates story—it's not a joke exactly with a big punch line. But there are some amusing elements in it. I'll try to point these out as we go. It's more of a wise snapshot on some deep truths about life—even our life today.

The story is about a rich man. He dresses in purple—the color of royalty—every day. Even royalty doesn't get decked out in the expensive purple on a daily basis. But this rich guy

wants everyone to know how important he is so it's "when I grow rich, I'll wear purple." He also wears fine linen. This might pass us by as some kind of other luxurious clothing. But linen refers to underwear. It's as if—and just in case you're interested in the lifestyles of the rich and famous—it's linen underwear for this guy every day. The imported stuff, not the Belk brand six pack.

He also feasts sumptuously every day. Again, for Jesus' original hearers, this daily feasting was a tip off that the rich man was not an observant Jew. The household, including servants, would not be observing the Sabbath, if every day required a feast. So, this guy's really over the top in his narcissism and self-importance.

The second character the poor man serves as a stark contrast. First of all, he has a name—Lazarus. This is the only named character in Jesus' parables. As it turns out the name Lazarus is really significant. One significance is that Lazarus means "the one whom God helps." Ironically, his condition in life certainly doesn't reflect God's help. The text suggests that someone drops him off—hungry and sick—at the rich man's gate. Maybe the rich man is the only one in town in a position to help this man. Which doesn't happen. Lazarus lies at gate within earshot of the rich man's lifestyle always

going on. Feasting is an ever present reality. Meats and breads, fruit and sweets fill the table every day, spilling onto the floor. And Lazarus gets none of it.

We read of dogs. In the Middle Eastern world dogs have very low status—it's doubtful that they were pets in Jesus' day. One possible explanation for the presence of dogs is as guard dogs. If the rich man had gates, he may have possessed chained guard dogs to keep intruders out. It may not have been a bad life for the dogs on the rich man's estate. With all that food around, the dogs probably had plenty of scraps to feed on.

Anyway, the text tells us that the dogs licked Lazarus' sores. My first thought is that not only was Lazarus sick and hungry, but as a further diminishment, he was too weak to drive off stray dogs that would lick his sores.

A closer look at the text reveals a tantalizing probability. The rich man ignored Lazarus, but (and that's the Greek word here, but) the dogs licked his sores. We've all heard that canine saliva has some wound cleansing properties. Lazarus may have been forsaken by people, but God's lowly creatures, the dogs, took pity on him and licked his sores.

Now the scene shifts from the earthly to the heavenly. Both men die and inherit their eternal fate—Lazarus embraced by Abraham, the rich man in torment. Notice here that the parable

isn't really a teaching about exactly what happens when you when you die. It simply assumes a reversal in fortunes after life is over.

As with their earthly situation, the rich man and Lazarus are close enough to see each other's condition. The rich man in torment cries out "Father Abraham, send Lazarus down to get me a drink." The rich man still regards Lazarus as inferior and the errand boy. Even in eternal torment, the rich man wants to be waited on by servants. And then there's this. Suddenly, it's *Father Abraham*. The rich man doesn't pay a bit of attention to his Jewish heritage in life, but suddenly he's totally about family in death. He can trace his lineage back to Abraham using Ancestry.com, but when it comes to giving a hot meal to a starving man at the end of his own driveway, he can't remember a single verse about how to behave towards one's fellow humanity.

Here's where we learn that in heaven a great chasm, a kind of big drop-off, exists and that even if Lazarus wanted to get the rich man a drink it's not going to happen. Could it be that Lazarus at Abraham's bosom whispers, "Father I'd be happy to get a drink or to help out in some way." But Abraham is having none of this. On earth there is no chasm separating people. People are given a chance to mitigate poverty or to lift one another up as they are able. But in eternal places, status is fixed.

Everything the rich man does is infuriating. He begs Abraham to send Lazarus back to his brothers to warm them. It's like, "Hey how you behave towards one another really does matter to God. I totally didn't see that one coming. We got to get the word out on that." Then the rich man goes on to suggest that if someone could actually go back from the dead—Lazarus could handle that--that then people would listen. Isn't that ironic? Lazarus lays on the rich man's door step for years, starving and too sick to stand. And it never occurs to the rich man to help him. But if the same Lazarus goes back from the dead as a preacher now and simply tells people that suddenly they'd listen and start paying attention to the hard living people in the world.

Notice that it isn't everyone that needs to hear this message. It's the rich man's brothers. "Hey, I've got family up there in the world. I've got to get the word out."

Here's where the naming of Lazarus in this parable becomes hugely important. Recall that there actually was a Lazarus in the gospels who died and who Jesus raised from the dead. There really was a Lazarus who comes back from the dead. He came and the religious officials still didn't get it.

What are we learning? Certainly we're being reminded that every human life is absolutely precious to God and every human

is an irreducible center of value. Because of this, the way we treat one another matters deeply to God. It never stops mattering to God.

In some way every person that you and run into is Lazarus—one whom God helps. The Lazarus in our story was indeed loved by God. Abraham held him. Angels transported him. And even the dogs helped out. It was only the self-absorbed rich man who missed how precious in God's eyes Lazarus was.

Finally, how well we understand this makes us who we are. Lazarus, you'll notice says nothing throughout the whole Parable. He doesn't shout out and raise a ruckus outside the rich man's gate. He doesn't condemn in Abraham's presence. He's utterly and gracefully silent. The rich man never learns. Even when all is disclosed after life, he's still trying to get Lazarus to serve him. He just starts waking up to the primacy of love even as he suffers in torment. "Wow," he says, "We've got to get this message out." Well, he's two thousand years late. Let's not, you and I, make the same mistake.