

SERMON- Proper 21 (C)

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Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15

Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16

Good Shepherd (Burke)

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1 Timothy 6:6-19

Luke 16:19-31

OPENER:

Someone once said that we as humans should not claim to know much about the “furniture in heaven” or the “temperature in hell.”¹

That is to say, there are limits to what we know about the life beyond.

Jesus, of course, does not have to follow that advice, nor does he seem to in our Gospel. Today, we get this evocative story of the afterlife with commentary on the connection between how we live and where we go when we die.

Jesus offers this *as a story* and not a literal roadmap. The tipoffs are the word “Hades” (the Hellenistic term for Hell), the sheer formulaic quality of the plot, and that this story can be traced to others common at the time.

So I would caution us not to think of this story of Lazarus and the Rich Man as a literal rendering of the geography of heaven and hell. Indeed, Scripture is fairly guarded in its description of both so it’s wise not to do specifics.²

The ancient mind understood this, so they came up with images and ideas that were fluid. The 1st century Jewish understandings of heaven, that is Jesus’ in his life, were dynamic and organic and in a state of flux.³

Some of our Christian forefathers, however, *did* do specifics, think the Middle Ages with the ghastly dimensions of Hell and the similarly detailed descriptions of the perfect heaven. In a modern world ordained by science, we could not accept those so our culture developed cartoons about heaven and hell. Pitchforks and billowy clouds are caricatures to hide the fact that we can’t know the unknowable.

Jesus again just seemed less interested in providing us with a detailed sacred cosmology. Instead, Jesus seemed to be more interested in what I will call the 3 “R’s”—Relationship, Redemption, and Resurrection

¹ Reinhold Niebuhr. 1964. *The Nature and Destiny of Man: Volume II: Human Destiny*. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 294.

² Macquarrie, John. 1982. *Principles of Christian Theology*. 2nd Ed. London: SCM, 357-8.

³ Marshall, I. Howard. 1988. *Luke*. (NIGTC) Exeter: Paternoster, 837.

RELATIONSHIP

First: Relationship: The focus in our Gospel is between the relationship of Lazarus and the Rich Man. In life they were separated by this great socio-economic gulf, in the afterlife, they were separated by this chasm of unknown length and depth.

Separated in life and in the afterlife, the one time that they were joined was in death. They both had that as their fate. We all are thus *related* in that way. We are all headed in the same direction.

I have been watching the Ken Burns PBS special on *Country Music* so I have that Hank Williams, Sr. song “I’ll never get out of this world alive” running through my mind. The genius is in the irony of the title of that song, the obvious quality of it all that reveals a surprising and strange truth, all punctuated by the artist’s tragic death before it was released.

It’s like how when people are looking to purchase a burial plot or go over their will, they sometimes say: “you know, I want to look into it.... Just in case.” As if there is another option? Perhaps immortality??... Cryogenics????

Although this story famously highlights the reversal of their relationship, the way things flipped, Lazarus and the Rich Man are still joined, it seems, still stuck together in the next world as they were in this one, linked by their humanity forever.

Against this idea that relationships persist, Wendell Berry once mused that “Some Christian spokespeople give the impression that the highest Christian bliss would be to get to Heaven and find that you are the only one there—that you were right and all the others wrong....”⁴

Jesus is instead stressing that our relationships matter, because life matters. It matters at every stage of life for every human being. It matters in life and in death, for the rich and the poor, relationships matter for all of us.

⁴ Berry, Wendell. 1993. *Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community: Eight Essays*. New York: Pantheon. 114.

REDEMPTION:

That begs the question of “Redemption” and whether or not all hope is lost for the Rich Man. Is there still time for him to be redeemed?

That gets us back to our earlier question: where is he exactly?

ALSO: *when* is he? *When* in God’s plans for salvation does he exist?

When I was growing up, whenever I got bored in church, I would thumb through the prayer book to the end, (this is an embarrassing story on many levels) and I would read the “Historical Documents” section of our Prayer Book which includes the 39 Articles, the great 16th century statement of Anglican theology . #22 of the 39 Articles is relevant:

~~The Romish Doctrine concerning Purgatory, Pardons, Worshipping and Adoration, as well of Images as of Relics, and also Invocation of Saints, is a fond thing, vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God.⁵~~

Purgatory had been a midway solution for some, it was a space of hope, a way-station for redemption. Maybe “Abraham’s bosom” then is some intermediate state between heaven and hell? Some limbo-like halfway point.

But Jesus again did not seem interested in such theological constructs but instead in Relationship, in Redemption, and, finally Resurrection.

RESURRECTION:

Our Gospel reading ends with the phrase “... even if someone rises from the dead.” I think that’s talking about Jesus’ Resurrection is an event that would occur in the future. But he was also talking how “‘Resurrection’ is coming *forwards* into the present in (his) ministry.”⁶ Therefore, living the Resurrected life is realizing that the reversal of Lazarus and the Rich Man is happening. The Story of the Prodigal Son is happening, God is coming, God is here, it’s happening, has happened, and will happen in my life and in yours.

The portrait that Jesus provides for the Resurrected life is one where your life matters, your body matters, your relationships matter, but where everything has changed.

⁵ *Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 871.

⁶ Wright, N. T. 2003. *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress. 438. (Emphasis Added)

We cannot see this change happening, not all the time, but it is indeed happening. This thing called “faith” allows us to catch glimpses of it. Maybe that means seeing a vision of heaven where the Rich Man knows Lazarus’s name, or realizing that hell is where the rich do not take care of the poor.

Regardless, it seems that the bad news is that we are not going to get to escape this world, rather the next one is coming to us.

Robert Farrar Capon puts it this way:

“When we talk resurrection... we’re not talking about some dumb corpse-revival scheme in which the dead get up and go back to the same old life they had before. We’re talking about a whole new order that actually works through death, loss, and failure.”⁷

This is an understanding of an unveiling of God’s kingdom here on this world, one that defies time and space, one where God’s reality become real here, is also a difficult one to grasp.

CONCLUSION:

Ultimately, we need to rest on poetry and song, because stuffy doctrine, literal descriptions and cartoons won’t do.

Hank Williams (there it is again) described resurrection as something like this in his famous song: “I Saw the Light”

I wandered so aimless life filed with sin
I wouldn't let my dear savior in
Then Jesus came like a stranger in the night
Praise the Lord I saw the light

This is a description of God’s love breaking in and piercing our sense of who we are, disturbing who we are in relation to one another, and ultimately redeeming us. Jesus coming to us. Like a train chugging down its tracks with its light on, with nothing that one can do to reverse it.

God will transcend any geography, any description and road map that we can come up. God will cross any lengths to reach us, the poor and the rich alike. God has the ability to bridge the chasm until we rest in his all-loving embrace.

AMEN

⁷ Capon, Robert Farrar. 2002. *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*. Grand Rapids MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 315.