

Believe it Again
Luke 16:19-31
September 24, 2022

A husband and wife, both in their 80s, died at the same time. When they got to heaven, they were astounded by the spectacular beauty they saw there: Lush, rolling lawns, bright Technicolor flowers, brilliant sunshine, gentle breezes, and the crowning touch – as far as the man was concerned – the most incredible golf course he had ever seen. It was spectacular! With disgust, he looked at his wife, and said to her with disdain in his voice “You! If it weren’t for you and all those bran muffins, we could have been here 20 years ago!”

We just read a parable that contained heaven and hell. Jesus told many parables or stories to get a point across. Often times Jesus would exaggerate to get that point across such as making a camel go through the eye of the needle, or taking a log out of your eye, or cutting your hand off when it sins, or hell is a place of great torment and fire.

This parable is not explaining what heaven and hell are like but rather invites us to look at people around us from the perspective of God’s eyes.

When I first read this parable in preparation for this message, the last sentence jumped out at me: “If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”

I immediately thought of Jesus as the One who rose from the dead. I thought about who Jesus really is. Are we convinced that Jesus, who rose from the dead, is Lord and Savior of *all*?

Every morning, I say a certain prayer just as the sun begins to rise. I make my hot chai tea latte and step outside and as I watch the sunrise I say, “Good morning, Heavenly Father, I worship you as the Creator and Sustainer of the Universe.” Then I pray for our earth. I pray for rain for the desert. I pray for greater care of our mountains.

I continue, "Good morning, Lord Jesus Christ, I worship you as Lord and Savior of all." Lately I have been adding, "May we believe it again." The scriptures say if we confess with our mouths that Jesus is Lord and believe in our hearts that God raise him from the dead, we will be saved. (Romans 10:9) In other words, we have relationship with God that is now and goes on forever. But somewhere along the way, many Christians have lost the belief that Jesus is Savior of all.

Well, the longer I looked at this parable, the more I had to admit that this is not the main purpose of this parable. I could have made a whole sermon on just that last line, being convinced of who Jesus is, but realized it is not faithful to the point of the whole story even though it is part of the story. So we will come back to it.

Let's look at this parable as a whole rather than one sentence.

The context of this parable is set next to another parable about money called the shrewd manager. Pastor Craig preached on this parable last week, which was addressed to the Pharisees, who as the passage says, "loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus." Then Jesus gives this parable about a rich man, a man who loved money and ignored the poor.

The parable opens with a beggar that has been laid at the gate of the rich man. Someone had put him there. Was he just dumped with no thought for the beggar at all? Or, was he laid there with the hope that the rich man would notice him and intervene on behalf of the beggar?

Whenever I read this parable, I think of the following people:

I was attending a Christian conference. I can't remember what the conference was about, I don't remember anything I learned, nor where it was held. What I do remember is something that happened on the very last day of the conference.

After the conference was over, I got in the hotel van to take us to the airport. The van was filled with other Christians who had attended the conference. As we drove, the van stopped at a stoplight near the airport. A homeless man at the corner walked over to our van, put his face right up to my window. I looked at him. His face was wrinkled and weathered from the sun. and he looked directly into my eyes.

I couldn't turn away from that face. I hesitated, not sure what to do. The other people in car ignored him as if he was invisible. I thought, why is everyone ignoring him? Why doesn't someone do something? We are Christians, aren't we? Finally making a decision, I reached for my purse, and as I did so, the van pulled away.

To this day, some 15 years later, I can still see his face, I remember those sorrowful eyes and it haunts me. To me, it was the face of Jesus, and Jesus was looking at me through his eyes. I was determined to do better, so for several years, I tried to give something to those who begged before me, but I seemed to have gotten away from that practice lately.

I was at a preaching conference in Denver. I stayed at a hotel in the middle of downtown Denver. Every day, for a week, I had to walk to the conference center which was about a half mile away. The downtown area was filled with homeless.

I remember one particular man. He was at the same corner every day. He was a vet with no legs and sat in a wheelchair. I remember how he greeted everyone with a cheerful hello and a smile, and tried to engage people in conversation, telling them to have a nice day. Most people walked by without saying a word and looking away as if he was invisible.

The first time I saw him, I spoke to him a bit, but didn't give any money. When I went by him later in the day as I walked back to my hotel, his cheerfulness had waned from the strain of it all. How difficult to attempt conversation with people and they treat you as if you are invisible. To this day, I still think of him, wishing I had done more, even engage in conversation with him.

Invisible people: do we see them? Did the rich man's sin begin with his not seeing Lazarus at all? The dogs noticed him. They had more compassion on Lazarus than the rich man.

What is so interesting in this parable is that the one who is invisible is given a name: Lazarus, which means "God is my help." The one who was visible, who had fine clothes and a banquet every day and lived in luxury, was given no name. He was just called "the rich man."

We are called to notice those in our culture who are deemed invisible. They have a name.

Last Thursday in the class Chuck Ramsay and are teaching on the whole Bible called *The Book*, we covered the book of Leviticus. It is a book of the Bible that is dull, boring, and seemingly irrelevant to us today. The Jews don't follow the sacrifices from Leviticus anymore. Christians never did. And someone in the class asked, "Why is it here?"

When Jesus was asked which commandment was the greatest, he answered by reducing the law into two sentences: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind," and, "Love your neighbor as yourself." That second one — "Love your neighbor as yourself" — is a quote directly from Leviticus. Jesus liked Leviticus. Noticing and loving your neighbor is an act of holiness, says the book of Leviticus.

At the end of class, I forgot to ask them for their favorite scripture passage from the book of Leviticus. Someone came up after class and said, "This is my favorite passage from Leviticus: 'When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself...'" (Leviticus 19:33). We were stunned at the relevance of this passage for today.

We are called to notice the invisible, the different, the ones not like us, the ones not from here. They have a name.

You may have noticed that in the heaven and hell scenario, everything is reversed. The rich man descends from luxury to suffering, while Lazarus is promoted from pain to blessedness. This might have been a great shock to Jesus' listeners for many had the view that the rich are blessed by God and poor cursed because they did something to deserve it.

Yet, throughout the Gospel of Luke, the poor are favored by God. It was Jesus' ministry. Jesus said this in his first sermon, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor..." (Luke 4:18).

The amazing thing is the rich man still treats Lazarus as invisible. As he languishes in hell, the rich man talks only to Abraham and ignores Lazarus. Still treating Lazarus as beneath him, as a slave, expecting Lazarus to get him some water and relieve his pain. A lesson still not learned.

And what about that chasm? There is no going back and forth between heaven and hell in this parable. What do we do with that? So, we come back to that last sentence about someone rising from the dead and my thinking about Jesus as Lord and Savior of all.

Shortly we will be saying The Apostle's Creed together, which is written in your bulletin. It is a statement of what we believe in our faith, especially about Jesus. In that creed, we make this statement: Jesus descended into hell. People are quite taken back by that statement. Many disagree with it.

But scripture teaches that after Jesus died on the cross, he went to hell to preach to those who were there. Apparently, they had an opportunity to believe in who Christ is. Jesus bridges that "great chasm" between heaven and hell because Jesus is Lord and Savior of all, and I am going to add...of everything. (I Peter 3:18-20; 4:5-6)

God is in the business of raising the dead.

One person said it this way: "Notice the note on which the parable ends. We are reminded once again that seeing the un-seeable, caring for the disenfranchised, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, setting the oppressed free are not only marks of discipleship...They are moments of resurrection. They bring the dead to life."

We are called to be part of the Resurrected One's life and ministry, the one who is Lord and Savior of all.

Paul Tillich said it this way: "A Christian is simply one beggar telling another beggar where to find food." Physical food. Emotional food. Spiritual food. Heavenly food. Jesus food.

A Muslim woman (Dr. Azza Karam), stood before the World Council of Churches at the beginning of this month said: "Christ's love wasn't meant only for people of the Christian faith...I believe very firmly as a Muslim that Christ's love was meant for me too."

Lord and Savior of all.

Now let us stand, take your bulletins, and declare what we believe by saying together the Apostle's Creed.