

Luke 16:19-31
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The things children hear and say can be very profound:
When one Sunday school teacher began her lesson by asking, "Boys and girls, what do we know about God?" one hand shot up in the air.
"He is an artist!" said the kindergarten boy.
"Really? How do you know?" the teacher asked.
"You know - Our Father, who does art in Heaven... "
Think about it...

Just a Taste

My first recollection of the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus is from working with the cast of Godspell. I was directing a group that would "mime" some of the narrated parables in a musical – the irony wasn't lost on me! The wise director of the show had found a place for those who weren't really singers but so wanted to be part of their church's production.

To be honest I didn't wasn't particularly aware of the message of the story – mainly because I was more interested in the telling, or rather showing, of the story. Surprisingly it turns out that this is one of many ancient folktales told for their moral point. People would have been hanging onto every word Jesus said, just to see where he was going to take it. Every storyteller put their own spin on things – the same way we rework jokes or movies today. We wait for that punch line or the moral of the story. But Jesus jumped the tracks on this one!

Bear with me because this one story covers a lot of ground!

Heaven...people are concerned about it. Does this parable and other stories in the Bible tell us that there is a heaven or hell? It appears there is indeed comfort. Remember Jesus' words to the thief beside him on the cross: "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

The parable of the sheep and the goats shows divergent paths: *Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.* Those who did not care are cast away...

Then we have Lazarus comforted and the Rich Man tormented. I still haven't decided whether these scenarios are realities - they certainly can strike fear into the hearts of those of us with compassion in our hearts. I do believe Jesus is giving us a message to help us live our lives today.

Perhaps, then, the Gospel not so much about heaven/hell. Neither is it about luxury and poverty – although Luke tells this parable after stories about money (the Widow's Mite and the Prodigal son's inheritance). Jesus' worked hard to clear up the Jewish misinterpretation of the time that blessings meant God favored you – and any disease or misfortune meant God cursed you. The lepers who were considered ritually unclean were also seen by people of faith as being sinful – otherwise why weren't they healthy? In one way, Jesus once again highlights, for those who would hear it, that illness or poverty OR wealth is not

visited on us by God. It's all in the matter of how we see one another, and how we respond to what life brings us.

“It wasn't his wealth that condemned the rich man, it was rather what that wealth made of him—a man completely insensitive and indifferent to the plight of those who needed his help.” CWB

“The parable does not exactly depict a reversal of fortune -- blessedness is not the opposite of luxury. People seek comfort in luxury, and certainly we are happier when we have enough. Yet, research shows conclusively that luxury has little to do with long-term happiness. More importantly, luxury is no substitute for blessed comfort.” Carey

It is not about what we have but ultimately what we do with what we have – be it money, goods or the personal gifts and talents we are blessed with. This is where the rubber meets the road.

For a time I was reading everything that Robert Fulghum wrote. So this story from his book “Uh-Oh” seems to illustrate exactly where the rubber meets the road. Whenever he would walk across his small city park he would get hit up for a handout from those we commonly label “winos.” One explained to him, “We've gone to the dogs and even the dogs don't want us.”

On this one day, a man offered him “part of a joke” for a nickel. So Robert gave him a nickel and he gave a tale about a rabbi, a nun, a pig and a chicken in a phone booth in Detroit. “Outrageous joke,” Fulghum says. “And he told it so well that I paid him five bucks for the punch line. It was a bargain. I laughed most of the afternoon as the story came back to mind. “

“The next day he learned that this small-scale vaudeville show was now a part of the life of that park. “A waitress in one of the nearby cafes, who daily went to smoke a cigarette there on her coffee breaks, befriended several of the winos. She actually talked to them.”

“She thought they were people. She convinced them to be more creative with their panhandling. They could be making twice as much for the same effort and have some fun as well. What did they have to lose?”

“That explains Mr. Part-of-a-Joke...the waitress...touched the winos – not on their heads but on their self-respect... She did not solve their problems but resolved the problem of food for one day. She urged them to fish instead of begging for fishbones. She offered them a glimpse of the truth that there are always options – [truth] which is called hope.” (pp 39-41)

Sometimes just a taste of support – or justice – or friendship – can keep one's life going. Just one touch of the Spirit can lift us when we least expect it. May we use what we have – may we use who we are – to be and to bring that hope.

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http://www.catholicwebphilosopher.com/2012_03_01_archive.html

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Fulghum, Robert. *Uh-Oh: some observations from both sides of the refrigerator door*. Villard Books, 1991.

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