

On Earth as It Is in Heaven

Luke 16:19-31

There are lots of jokes about the hereafter; jokes determining who gets into heaven and who is bound for hell; jokes about misunderstandings of how God determines whose in and whose out. Jokes like this one:

“After a preacher died and went to heaven, he noticed a New York cab driver had been awarded a higher place than he.

‘I don’t understand,’ he complained to God. ‘I devoted my entire life to my congregation.’

God explained to him, ‘Our policy here in heaven is to reward results. Now, was your congregation well attuned to you whenever you gave a sermon?’

‘Well,’ the preacher had to admit, ‘some in the congregation fell asleep from time to time...’

‘Exactly,’ said God, ‘and when people rode in this man’s taxi, they not only stayed awake, they even prayed.’”

Or maybe you’ve heard this one:

“Three people died — a doctor, a school teacher, and the head of a large HMO.

When they were at the pearly gates, St. Peter asked the Doctor ‘What did you do with your time on Earth?’

The doctor replied, ‘I healed the sick and, if they were not able to pay, I would do it for free.’

St. Peter told her, ‘You may go on.’

St. Peter then asked the teacher what he did. He replied, ‘I gave my life to teaching children with disabilities.’

St. Peter shook his head affirmingly and told the teacher, ‘You may go in.’

St. Peter asked the third person, ‘What did you do?’

The man hung his head and replied, ‘I ran a large HMO.’

To which St. Peter replied, ‘You may go in — but you can only stay three days.’”

One more:

“A doctor, an engineer, and a Porta Potty cleaner arrived at the pearly gates.

The doctor said how he’d healed the sick, helped the lame; but he was a sinner and was sent to hell.

The engineer told how he’d built homes for the homeless; but he had messed up the environment, and so was also sent to hell.

The Porta Potty cleaner was frightened by all this, but as soon as he mentioned his occupation, God said ‘You’ve already been through hell. Welcome to heaven.’”

“You’ve already been through hell. Welcome to heaven.” That’s basically what Father Abraham says to Lazarus in our parable this morning.

If we were not careful, the temptation we face with the parable of the rich man and Lazarus is to give more attention to its depiction of heaven and hell than to its point. But, like all of these jokes, the final destination isn’t really the punchline.

The punchline isn’t about *where*, but about *how* the final judgment is made in the most unexpected of ways.

“There was a certain rich man, who lived a very good life indeed: handmade suits, custom-tailored shirts, a daily menu [of steak and lobster], and, presumably a portfolio to bankroll the whole operation indefinitely.” That’s how the Episcopal Priest, Robert Farrar Capon, paraphrases the first line of our story (*Kingdom, Grace, Judgment*, 314).

The rich man wore purple and fine linens — literally dressed himself as royalty. And, scripture says, “he feasted sumptuously” — a phrase usually reserved for *special* occasions. But this man did it *every* day! A fine life, full of fine things.

But outside the heavily guarded gate of the rich man’s mansion, there was a very poor man named Lazarus, who was not covered in purple and fine linen, but covered in sores.

He did not “feast sumptuously every day,” but longed for the pieces of bread that the rich man had used as napkins and thrown to ground.

So pathetic was Lazarus’s plight that dogs would come and lick his wounds. And, surely, these weren’t the rich man’s purebred dobermans, but some dirty, unkempt, half-starved strays — the kind of dogs you would fear had the mange.

Dogs, like pigs, were considered unclean by first century Jews, so this little detail was not so much meant to express of the kindness of dogs, as much as it was to add a further description of just how bad things were for Lazarus.

Eventually, says Jesus, both men died, but only the rich man was afforded a funeral.

And this is where things get a bit strange:

We're told that Lazarus died and angels carried him off to the bosom of Abraham. Poor, sickly, starved Lazarus was given a place of intimacy and honor by Abraham at the heavenly banquet.

After his death, the rich man found himself in Hades and in torment. The one who had "feasted sumptuously" everyday longed for a drop of water to wet his tongue. He looked up and, in the distance, could see Abraham far away — and by Abraham's side was that beggar who sat at his gates, Lazarus.

The rich man called out to Abraham: "Father Abraham, have mercy on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames" (16:24).

Now — can you believe the gall of this guy? Not only did he ignore Lazarus' suffering in life, but now in death he still thinks Lazarus ought to serve *him*!

Abraham disagrees: "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now *he* is comforted here, and *you* are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed."

In other words, there is no undoing what has been done.

It's pretty disturbing, isn't it? Did you notice that there is no explicit assessment of morality here? We aren't told that the rich man got his wealth by dubious means or by cheating or mistreating others. And we aren't told that Lazarus was somehow morally superior — that he was more righteous or deserving of God's mercy. All that we have for determining why one was condemned to Hades and the other was not is the *implication* that during his lifetime the rich man had the power and resources to help Lazarus, but chose not to lift a finger.

Even more disturbing for us "confessing Christians?" There is absolutely no notion of "justification by grace through faith" present in this parable. There is no moment in this story when we understand Lazarus to be a "true believer" and the rich man to be a "jack believer." The only condition that seems to set them apart is that one was rich and the other was poor.

Father Abraham does not say: "Child, Lazarus prayed the sinner's prayer. But you did not." No, he simply points out how things have been reversed: "During your lifetime,

you got the good end of the stick and Lazarus got the bad end. Now things are turned around. *He* is comforted, and *you* are in agony.”

We live in the richest country in the world. What does this mean for us?

Remember how I defined a good sermon: one that comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. Are you starting to feel afflicted yet?

How close does Jesus have to get before the hairs on the back of our necks start to stand up?

“He was poor and suffered. You were rich and lived well. Now your fates have been reversed. That’s it. Game over,” says Abraham. “And to make sure it stays that way, a great chasm has been fixed between us.”

In life, it was the rich man’s *gate* that protected the rich man from Lazarus’ agony. But what if, in Jesus’ parable, that uncrossable gate that so protected the rich man from Lazarus’ agony in life becomes the uncrossable chasm in his death?

What if that chasm that separated the rich man and Lazarus in eternity was a manifestation of the one that already existed in their earthly lives?

I wonder how often we encounter such “gates” in our lives, but, like the rich man, we don’t really *see* them?

I remember recognizing the stark contrast between “the haves” and “the have nots” in our own country back in college when, on one spring break, Christen and I were heading north out of San Francisco. We crossed the Golden Gate Bridge and entered Marin County, one of the richest counties in the country, and I’ll never forget looking out my car window and seeing a homeless man urinating on the bushes at the edge of a Maserati dealership. You talk about a snapshot of the “haves” and “have nots.” All that stood between this man with only the clothes on his back and a row of \$100,000 luxury cars was a hedge — a simple, but effective “gate.”

Or when Christen and I moved to Princeton, New Jersey for seminary. We’d never lived among the extremes of wealth and poverty like that. In Princeton, Lamborghinis parked at meters on the street. Students at Princeton, don’t join fraternities and sororities. That is far beneath them. No, they join “dining clubs” where you show up in the evenings to practice eating with others, so that you’re prepared for a future of entertaining elite guests and clientele. In fact, the town of Princeton is so wealthy, that the only low-income zoned housing in the city was the seminary’s student housing.

But twelve miles south of Princeton is Trenton — one of the poorest cities in the country. A few miles can make a great “gate” between those who have and those who don’t.

Or one time when I met a friend for breakfast at Urban Egg over on Tejon, and a homeless man wandered into the restaurant and back toward the restrooms. We watched as the hostess, flustered that he'd somehow made it by her, couldn't decide precisely what to do, who to ask for help, how to handle it.

A restaurant filled mostly with downtown business people were at an absolute for how to respond when one lonely "Lazarus" walked in and invaded our space. You see, that man had crossed the "gate." We were all ok as long as he stayed outside on the bench, were the beggars are supposed to be. But he didn't stay where he was supposed to stay. And the only reason we even noticed him was because he crossed over.

Friends, what if the chasm in eternity is a reflection of the ones we are constantly making here on earth?

And, the the point, must it be that way?

We know the reality. We know that there will always be poor among us. We know that mental health issues, addictions, and tragic life circumstances are some of the prominent reasons people find themselves in Lazarus' position. We know that many corporations and institutions are designed to help the rich get richer.

But *we* aren't just any corporation or any institution. We are the Church — Christ's body here on earth. So how are we called to do things differently? How do we begin to take make a difference?

It seems to me that crossing over to the life-giving side begins at our own gate, by what we bring out and who we invite in.

It won't be easy, but nothing worth doing ever is. And besides we won't be doing it alone.

Did you know that in all of the parables Jesus ever told in all of the gospels Lazarus is the only character who is given a name? With the exception of Abraham in this same parable, Lazarus is the only character in any of Jesus' parables who is named.

In Jewish thought, names are important. When Sarah finally conceives and is so overwhelmed with joy, she laughs and she declares that this child's name will be *Isaac*, which means, *laughter*. When Jacob wrestled with God all through the night, the next morning God blessed him with a new name — the name *Israel*, which means, *one who has wrestled with God*. Daniel was judged guilty and thrown in that lions den because he refused to worship other gods. Do you know what *Daniel* means? It means, *God is my judge*.

Names in Jewish thought have weight. They have substance. The name, Lazarus is the Greek form of the Hebrew name *Eleazar*. Do you know what *Eleazar* means? It means, *God will help*.

One thing is for certain – God will help those who suffer on this side of reality. But God will help us, too, if we'll let him. God will help us see those who suffer through God's compassionate eyes.

And when we see them as God does, God will help us to begin taking down the gates that separate us. And then the most amazing thing will happen: God will work within us to overcome the chasm that sits between us and those who aren't like us.

And then, "on earth as it is in heaven" won't just be a prayer, but a fact.

One last joke:

"A man died and arrived at the pearly gates. The Lord himself came out to greet him. The man asked the Lord about the nature of heaven and hell, to which the Lord replied, 'Come, I will show you hell.'

Together they entered a large room where a group of people sat around a huge pot of stew. Everyone there in hell was starving and desperate. Each person held a spoon that could reach the pot; but each spoon had a handle that was too long, making it impossible to feed themselves. So, the suffering was terrible.

'Come,' said the Lord, 'now I will show you heaven.'

They then entered another large room which was identical to the first: the pot of stew, a group of people around it, and the same long-handled spoons. But there everyone was happy and well-fed.

'I don't understand,' the man said. 'Why are these people happy and well-fed when the people in hell were so miserable?'

The Lord smiled, 'Ah, it is simple, my child. Here in heaven they have learned to feed each other.'"

May we model now what we hope for eternity.

Amen.