

Luke 16: 19-31 "From Riches to Rags" Rev. Janet Chapman 10/20/19

This week an astounding thing happened in Egypt in case you didn't hear. Twenty coffins with perfectly preserved mummies were discovered by complete accident, covered only by about a foot of sand. The coffins are over 3000 years old and have managed to escape the hands of tomb-raiders because they were buried not in caves where the rich were often buried, but in a sand dune, which also protected them from termites. The coffins revealed ornate, colorful carvings still intact which archaeologists guess were to compensate for the fact that the coffins weren't laid in proper tombs. Deemed the most significant discovery in many years, the coffins will go on display in the magnificent Grand Egyptian museum in Giza opening next year. The coffins most likely belonged to lower middle class Egyptians who couldn't afford proper burial sites, but ironically that is what saved these coffins from being raided, torn up by grave robbers out to make a buck. No one in their right mind was going to dig up sand dunes to find some of the most precious historical relics of our time. It is a turning of the tables as the tombs of the rich have too often been raided while the poor are protected.

Tables are turned and expectations are blown in today's parable where we meet a rich man and a poor man who have taken up residence in the afterlife. Abraham is there as well, that consummate waiter, who was promised some land and descendants, and then waited, and waited, and waited. After the long-awaited arrival of his son Isaac, Abraham was later willing to give up his own flesh at the request of God. Abraham becomes the perfect figure to mediate between the two figures. Famously rich himself, Abraham's willingness to part with Isaac makes it seem as though any other material thing would have also been sacrificed had it been asked of him. At any rate, Abraham is clearly in a favorable position in the afterlife and now comforts a former beggar who had lived with bodily sores his entire earthly life. Meanwhile,

the man who was rich in the earthly life can't find any relief, having gone from fine riches to burning rags. The parable is not original to Jesus but has a background in Egyptian folklore about the reversal of fates after death. It also has a connection to rabbinic tales as the Greek name Lazaros has the same root consonants as the name Eliezer, who in Genesis 15 was a servant of Abraham's. Rabbinic tales feature Eliezer walking in disguise on earth and reporting back to Abraham on how his children are observing the Torah's prescriptions regarding the treatment of the widow, the orphan, and the poor.

Told by the Great Storyteller, here is truth still played out in our lives and on the world stage. Its great reversal of fortunes moved Albert Schweitzer so much so that after studying the parable, he set up his hospital in Africa. Vernon Johns, MLK's predecessor at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, got hauled off to jail in 1945 for advertising his sermon title on the marquee "Segregation After Death" based on this story. Johns had to preach the sermon to the police and as he did, it became all too clear how the message was playing out in that very jail. For us in 2019, this story can easily be adapted to show the rich man as a corporate executive and Lazarus as one of his former employees, a victim of downsizing, rising prescription costs, and a failing health care system whose hard times just kept getting harder. The rich man isn't deemed as corrupt or immoral nor is the poor man deemed as irresponsible or wasteful. They are simply described economically rather than appraised morally. It is a story of two people; one poor and one rich; one dressed in rags and the other dressed in rich, purple linen; one given a name which means "God helps" and the other surprisingly unnamed.

Yet we probably have names we know that fit the bill for both. In an age of mass communication, we know who the rich are, they are highly visible in our society. And we don't

have to go too far to meet Lazarus, in fact, two ended up at church needing food and aid last Sunday. I wonder if you saw them, talked to them? It was a busy morning and many folks were caught up in their responsibilities, in their desires to talk with others, in their need to get home and take care of business. It would have been really easy not to see them; they came in at different times, one sat with us in the 9:30 service, a destitute pilgrim trying to make her way home, and another arrived before and after 2nd service, who has no home except the fields around us. Each searching for crumbs that may have fallen from our sumptuous table. We might have missed them, still miss them when they cross our path, it happens. We have a lot on our plates right now and time is precious. Our plates are overflowing with the demands of home repairs and renovations, car maintenance, school activities, community obligations, job requirements and such; our focus has to be there in order to succeed.

God knows we don't not see them on purpose. We aren't intentionally trying to create fixed chasms, economic barriers where people can't transition, where the "have-nots" can't join the "haves" in this world, that has never been nor will it be our intent. We can't do anything about the wealthy and powerful who use their positions to ensure their prosperity, who live by a quid pro quo mentality to keep themselves on top. In fact, like the nameless in the story, we have great compassion for others, we are always thinking of the well-being of our families. We would be the first ones to say, "We don't want our children, our grandchildren, to grow up in a hellish world of torment divided by the "haves" and the "have-nots." We desire equity and economic justice for all... or at least for our families. Let us warn our families so that they will not end up in the same mess, let us teach them better than we have been taught and lived." Abraham says, "They have Moses and the prophets to whom they can listen." But

somehow that doesn't seem enough, and by implication it seems that scripture isn't enough, so the pleading continues as does the torment of living with a hardness of heart. There are some of us who therefore employ tactics of fear and manipulation so that younger generations have no choice but to comply. Stockpile the weapons, keep and protect what is ours at all costs, and dismiss all manner of merciful and compassionate efforts as recorded in scripture because it will not help. Even hair-raising miracles like someone rising from the dead are ignored and will not change the minds of those who are set on looking out for number one.

I don't know about you, but I don't particularly like getting my toes stepped on. It would be easier if Jesus just stuck to finding lost sheep and welcoming prodigals. Today's story is nice if you identify with Lazarus, even the bulletin picture is cute as the dogs are portrayed more as companion animals versus scavengers drawn to bloody sores. But the odds are we have been the ones who didn't see Lazarus, who missed opportunities to ease his or her suffering. The story seems to remind us that God doesn't have a problem with the "haves" in our world, which I find a relief. It is that God expects us to treat the resources we "have" as a sacred responsibility, especially as long as the "have-nots" exist. Jesus is cautioning us through a shocking reversal of fortunes, a riches to rags story, about the use of our time, talents, and finances and how they are used to help those in need. There are no moral judgments here only a reminder to change the disparities now or they will be changed for us later on.

One of the vivid memories I have of our family's trip to Paris was the tour of the catacombs, where millions were buried after centuries of overcrowding in the city's cemeteries. The ground gave up the rich and poor alike over the years and something had to be done so all the bodies were relocated to these catacombs. It makes you realize that death is the ultimate

equalizer as rich people's bones and poor people's bones pretty much looked the same. Skulls, femurs, and humerus bones were all stacked in designs to somehow be appealing to the tourist who pays an arm and a leg just for the privilege to walk through. It occurs to me that the disparities of our world will eventually resolve themselves, just as in the parable. And the bones themselves will testify, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." May we have the eyes to see and ears to listen, Amen.