

Luke 16:19-31
September 29, 2019

“WHO’S THAT KNOCKING AT MY DOOR?”

There’s a Garfield the Cat cartoon in which, on a cold winter night Garfield looks out the window and sees Odie the Dog peering through. Garfield thinks to himself: *‘this is horrible - here I am in the comfort of a warm house, well fed, and there’s Odie outside, cold and hungry. I can’t stand it anymore.* So, Garfield goes over to the window ... and pulls the curtains.

Just another cartoon about the dislike between cat and dog I suppose, but it’s amazing how well Garfield’s creator gets the gist of the parable of *‘Lazarus and the Rich Man.’* Normally parables are ponderous tools, offering little in the way of a tidy resolution to a dilemma posed or a clear course of action to take.

The ‘Parable of the Good Samaritan’ told us to *“go and do likewise”*, but “likewise” is a frightfully imprecise term, it doesn’t define neighbor or offer a solution to the problem of religious or socio-economic divisions. The ‘Parable of the Prodigal Sons’ leaves us no hint of how to go about reconciliation between siblings. The ‘Parable of the Dishonest Manager’ last week left us begging for guidance on how and why the *“children of the kingdom”* ought to tear a page from the playbook of the *“children of this world”* and become a little more devious! Our faith has to look for those answers – that’s the beauty and challenge of parables.

By contrast today’s story is not so much parable as editorial cartoon - pretty much a 2 x 4 to the head! The only question it poses regards proportional justice, or how a loving God could eternally punish someone for their sins of omission with something so horrible as hell. Particularly when told on the heels of a parable of a dishonest, greedy manager who quite frankly *didn’t* get what he deserved! What’s clear however, no matter with siblings or strangers is that in this life turning our back or closing the shades just won’t do.

Why Jesus didn’t let the story end like Dickens’s did in *“A Christmas Carol”* is not clear. In that story Marley, Scrooge’s business partner, comes to him with a stern warning of what will be if he continues his greedy, indifferent ways - and it worked. Scrooge is frightened into changing. In our story a request for a warning to the living from the dead is flatly denied. Father Abraham, speaking for God, says that the living have the living word of God and if they ignore the living word one from the dead would be of little use.

Moreover, Abraham says, there is this border, most translations of the bible say “great chasm” that cannot be bridged, where, in the life to come - a point of demarcation between the blessed and the cursed lies. But while vivid images of this chasm are part of the story, the chasm that matters to our Lord is that one which exists between need and resource. We have all seen, or can if we care to, images of human need. We know what it looks like. What matters is our recognition of our duty to alleviate it!

That’s a chasm that, if unbridged, keeps us in a sort of, if you will, living hell. This parable isn’t about a man who died and went to hell. It describes a man who created his own hell on earth by isolating himself from anything that might impinge his enjoyment of his splendid isolation.

What the so called “rich man” experienced in the afterlife was in stark contrast to what he experienced and enjoyed in this life. The irony is he fashioned both lives. What he found in the afterlife was for all intents a continuation of what he started for himself in this life. He didn’t respond to people in life. He may in fact have used them – as he appears to want to still use Lazarus – golly even Abraham! Help me! Serve me! Warn me! Hell, a distasteful yet constituent part of our confession of faith may be eternal, conscious physical pain, I don’t know. It may also simply be a terrible isolation, knowing but not being able to respond to people, knowing what love and mercy is, and not being able to receive or express either.

C.S. Lewis, in his book “The Screwtape Letters” wrote that *“hell...rests on the assumption that...one self is not another self. Rather, my good is my good, and your good is yours. What one gains another loses...”* *“to be” means to be in competition.*” It’s a terrible zero-sum game in other words. Yet, Lewis goes on to say, God intends that the good of oneself is *to be* the good of another. This “impossibility” God calls love. And love is either desired, or it is rebuffed. It is either offered, or it is withheld. The Rich Man in our story sought his own good – defined for us in Luke as isolation from need. Then, upon his death this sad, lifelong need of his was fulfilled by isolation from what God calls good.

But we ask – as we ought, does not our belief in a just and loving God demand that eventually any punishment God may allow be “restorative”, of the sort any loving parent in this life shows their children? There are places in Scripture where it seems to indicate “yes”, such as Jesus statement in John 12 that when he is “lifted up” he will draw all people unto himself, or Paul in Romans 8 saying *“nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.”* And there are places, such as our story today where it seems to indicate no. In his book “The Great Divorce”, C.S. Lewis says *“there are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘THY will be done.’”*

An important message of the Bible is that God on whom we depend for our life and salvation, himself the very source of our ability to love at all, has chosen to be dependent on us, sinners, to be the agents of that love. ‘Give as good as you get’ is a common and accepted saying among us, is it not? All right then, let’s be about it, only as vessels of mercy. The sort a “Rich Man” in our parable last time seemed all too eager to offer. It would not only be for our neighbor’s earthly benefit, but apparently our eternal good. In so many words – let’s raise the shades and bring in the Odies... and Lazarus’ of this world. AMEN