

'Gulf crossed'

A meditation on Luke 16:19-31 by Kat Wagner

Dear sisters and brothers...

I wonder if you've noticed that for the last few weeks, the sermons have been following a theme? Two weeks ago we looked at Jesus' parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. Last week, Pastor Alex spoke about the parable told by Jesus about the shrewd manager. And this week, we have another parable from Jesus: the Rich Man and Lazarus.

The preaching series is called 'Having words with Jesus', and it's all about the stories and teachings which Jesus told. Some of these parables Jesus told to his disciples, and some he told to those who were not so supportive of his ministry. This parable is one such example.

Living a 'double life'

Jesus is addressing this parable to the Pharisees. The Pharisees were religious people who believed that if they had the right beliefs and did the right religious practices they would be right with God. But it had no bearing on their daily lives. In fact, they were described as 'lovers of money'. They lived a 'double life', keeping the sacred and the secular separate. They ridiculed the idea that getting into heaven might in some way be connected with ordinary life.

So, to these Pharisees, Jesus tells a parable of a rich man, who lived his daily life ignoring the plight of the beggar by his door, and who, when he dies, finds himself in torment, far away from the paradise of heaven he expected to enjoy.

Jesus is extremely daring in his parable. To compare the Pharisees with an ungenerous rich man who ends up in Hades!

This parable is another example of God's upside-down Kingdom, where the first shall be last, and the greatest shall be the servant of all.

God's heart for justice

Let's take a look at the other main character in this parable: Lazarus. This Lazarus is not the brother of Mary and Martha. Lazarus in this parable is a poor

man, a beggar. He is a figure in a story who represents all people who live in poverty. All people whose lives are difficult, who have been denied the right to make choices, who do not have access to the opportunities to live a tolerable life.

The theme of justice for the poor is so important to God. We read about it in our Call to Worship from Psalm 146:

The Lord executes justice for the oppressed. He gives food to the hungry, sets the prisoners free and opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down. The LORD watches over the strangers and he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

Another sign of Jesus' prejudice for the poor, his bias from the bottom, is the way he assigns a name in this parable. In Jesus' parables, his characters rarely are given names. Just look at the parables we've studied recently – they are stories about a son and a father, a shepherd, a woman, a manager. But here, in this parable, one of the characters is given a name. Jesus shows great honour to the poor man by naming him Lazarus. And in fact, his name has a very special meaning. The name Lazarus is the Latinized form of Eleazar, which means 'God is my help'. It's no coincidence that Jesus chose this name for the poor man.

So what is the purpose of this parable?

Is this parable about the hope of life after death and the promise of eventual justice for those who now live under the burden of poverty?

Or is this parable about the problem of inequality between rich and poor on earth?

I would say: yes to both.

The Kingdom of God is both 'life in all its fullness' right now amidst the challenges of daily life, and it is the joy we look forward to of our eternal home in heaven.

But we have challenging concept here too: an un-crossable divide

While they were alive, the rich man seems to live in a kind of selfish heaven and Lazarus' life is hell, but after death the Rich Man is in torment and Lazarus is carried by angels to Abraham's side.

There is a gulf between them. A great divide. In death. But also in life.

Jesus seems to lay the source of this gulf at the feet of the Rich Man. What was the Rich Man's sin?

He lived a life of luxury, in close proximity with those in desperate need, and yet he didn't share his wealth.

Jesus' listeners, the Pharisees, also had wealth which they did not share. They missed God in the mundane. We are also at risk of doing the same. What wealth, resources, influence or skills do you have? How are you using and sharing *your* wealth, resources, influence and skills with those around you?

But it was not only his lack of generosity which was the problem, it was also his attitude towards others.

Even in death from his place in Hades, the Rich Man continued to view Lazarus as 'beneath him', treating him like a servant, ordering him about: "Fetch me some water!", "Go, send a message to my family!"

He did not view Lazarus as an equal, as a fellow human with dignity and value. For him, Lazarus had been an annoyance, a problem, invisible.

African theologians say that the rich man's sin was that he failed to practice *ubuntu*. Ubuntu is a concept from the sub-Saharan African tradition of community equality. It means "I am because you are". It's a concept of humanity, which recognizes both the needs of the individual and the fact that we can only thrive in relation to one another.

Nelson Mandela was once asked to describe *ubuntu*, and he said:

"In the old days, when we were young, a traveler through our country would stop at a village, and he didn't have to ask for food or for water. Once he stops, the people give him food, entertain him. Ubuntu should not mean that people should not address themselves, the question therefore is, are you going to do so in order to enable the community around you to improve."

In our parable, the gulf between the Rich Man and Lazarus, between where they find themselves in heaven and Hades, Jesus says, cannot be crossed. It is impossible. The relational connections between these two men were

completely broken. In this case, *ubuntu* was a dream not realized on earth: why should it suddenly exist after death?

So how can we live *ubuntu* in our context?

How can we, who live in a city like Munich, where we are surrounded by the very rich and the very poor, how can we cross the gulf? How can we practice *ubuntu* here?

Sharing our wealth, whether we have lots or little, should not be motivated by feelings of guilt. That is not Jesus' message.

I believe Jesus' heart is that we see one another as treasured daughters and sons of God, as precious people, as dignified human beings, as sisters and brothers.

For me, it starts with our values and attitudes.

We cannot expect ourselves, or others, to behave generously unless we have an absolute conviction that God's love for *you* is just as real as God's love for *me*. That God's love for *them* is just as real as God's love for *us*.

And here, in Peace Church, we have a really good place for learning to see one another as loved by God, of learning to share with one another. Church is the school for learning to live as disciples of Christ. And from here, we can look out with slightly clearer eyes and with slightly warmer hearts. From here, we can go out into our neighbourhood, our city, our nation, our world, with open eyes of compassion and hearts filled with love, sharing what we have with others. The dream of *ubuntu* becomes real. God's Kingdom of justice for the poor and for life in all its fullness becomes real. The gulf is crossed.

Amen