

Proper 21C: Luke 16:19-31
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Church of the Good Shepherd

Sliding Doors: There but for the grace of God

Living in Ashland, thirty minutes away, I do a fair amount of time in the car, going to and from the church, running errands and the like. As much time as I spend driving, it's inevitable that I hit delays sometimes—accidents, congestion, closed roads, interminable red lights, that all get in the way, I feel, of my smooth and speedy travel. When that's the case, like most people, I get frustrated. Sometimes, though, when I get stopped at a railroad crossing or get behind someone driving slowly on a county road, I imagine that maybe my delay, as inconvenient as it is, is in fact a gift from God, that maybe because I was held up, I was saved from an accident or more likely a speeding ticket! I have no proof of that of course. It's just a comforting thought, to think that, had things gone differently, things could have turned out worse.

This idea was explored in the 1998 movie *Sliding Doors* with Gwyneth Paltrow. In the movie, a woman's career and love life both hinge, unknown to her, on whether or not she is able to catch a train. She misses the train and that leads to a certain future, but where she catches it, a different life proceeds. The movie explores both possibilities side by side, as we get both scenarios played out. The film plays on the theory known as the theory of parallel universes or alternative realities, where there isn't just one reality, one timeline, but multiple, all taking place at the same time in different dimensions. According to this theory, time is imagined as a kind of tree, with branches representing different realities that diverge from a shared past, with further twigs spoking off of the branches, and each branch-point representing an event or decision that could have gone one way or another. So that somewhere in the "multiverse" there's a reality where the Nazis won WWII, or where 9/11 didn't happen, or where someone that looks just like you is living a slightly—or even a drastically—different life because of some small or great change in the timeline. Maybe your alternative self went to a different college or dated a different person or just decided to sleep in one day or wear a different outfit to a job interview, or they took a different route to church this morning. It doesn't matter what the change was, because in the "multiverse," so the theory goes, there are an infinite variety of realities where every possible contingency is played out.

It's mind boggling, I know, the stuff of science fiction. In fact, alternative universes is the main plot device of the most recent reboot of *Star Trek* and is central to the current storyline of the Marvel/Avengers movies.

Now, you're probably thinking, what in the world does any of this have anything to do with today's Gospel lesson? Jesus is talking about what happens when a rich man and a poor man die and get their just deserts; he's not talking about alternative universes! Maybe not, but that's where my mind went when I was reading this parable this past week. Let me explain.

The parable Jesus tells has a rich man going to Hades, a place of torment, a place we know of as hell, while the poor man Lazarus goes to the “bosom of Abraham,” which we assume is heaven. Now, it doesn’t say why one was condemned and the other was rewarded, not explicitly, not definitively. We *assume* it was because the rich man was rich. I mean, all rich people are evil, right? Everyone who has money is undoubtedly morally compromised. Isn’t that what we are taught to believe? “Money is the root of all evil,” and all that? Except, that as we read in our first lesson from 1 Timothy, that quote is actually “*love of money is the root of all kinds of evil.*” Similar, but with an important difference. It’s not that money is bad, evil, but that loving it too much can cause all kinds of spiritual, moral and economic problems. In fact, Jesus never condemns anyone for having wealth, never says the rich will go to hell because they are rich. Nor does he assert that the poor are inherently virtuous, simply for being poor. The poor can be just as mean-spirited, just as vicious, just as greedy as the rich, even as they have less to be greedy about.

So if it’s not that the rich man was rich and Lazarus wasn’t that determined their eternal futures, what did? What was it about how they lived that led to the two being separated after death. I wonder if, like in *Sliding Doors*, there was some event or some decision in their lives that led them to be where they were. And if they had both taken a different path, if they’d been five minutes later or five minutes earlier to some important happening, their lives would have turned out differently. Maybe it would have been the rich man begging at the gate of Lazarus as he ate sumptuously from his banqueting table. In the multiverse, anything is possible. The two would still be who they are, even though their fates would have been different.

If that is possible, then perhaps the reason the rich man was condemned to hell was because he couldn’t recognize, couldn’t conceive that under different circumstances, he could have been the one in need of help, he could have been the one begging for kitchen scraps, and so in the end he’s really not all that different from Lazarus. In a different life, they both could have been rich, or both poor. So, there’s nothing intrinsically better about the rich man than the poor one. They both share a common humanity.

I mean, one explanation the parable does suggest for why the rich man is in hell is that, contrary to what we might assume, the rich man knew Lazarus, as he called him by name when talking to Abraham after he died. He knew Lazarus in life, no doubt saw him as he went in and out of his gated estate, but he failed to do anything about him or for him. Lazarus was beneath him, literally lying on the ground at his gate. He couldn’t do anything for the rich man, couldn’t improve his life or add anything to his wealth or influence or prestige. So he wasn’t worth the rich man’s attention.

This same sort of instrumentalization, the rich man treating others based on what they can do for him, is evident even after death, as he says to Abraham: "Father Abraham, have mercy on me. Send little Lazarus to dip his finger in water and cool my tongue. It's hot as Hades down here." When his request is turned down, he asks that Lazarus instead become his errand-boy, “Run

along and bring this message to my brothers.” These requests betray what we might call ‘habits of control.’ The rich man is used to ordering people around, being in control.

Lazarus had an entirely different experience. Jesus says Lazarus spent his time lying at the rich man’s gate, as if he couldn’t get around by himself and had to be carried there. He couldn’t even keep the stray dogs from sniffing around and licking his wounds. In contrast to the rich man, Lazarus was not in control of anything, even himself. He was “dependent on the kindness of strangers,” to quote Blanche Dubois, and more importantly, the kindness of God. In fact, his name—Lazarus, or *El-azar*—means “God has helped,” which contrasts with the rich man who helps himself.

What separated the two, what the rich man allowed to divide them, then was his wealth, his status, his fortune, which, as I suggested could have turned out entirely differently. “There but for the grace of God...” And yet the rich man let his riches wall himself off from others like Lazarus. And that wall became a great chasm after he died. In death, he no longer had his wealth, but those riches left their mark, left him with habits and a deformed character after death. Little wonder he feels tormented, tormented by how far he has fallen, how far he was from the rewards he expected he’d always enjoy.

This parable is then not about being wealthy, but about what we do with wealth, or rather what we allow it to do to us, how wealth deludes us into thinking that we own what we have, that we have earned it, and so we deserve all that comes with being wealthy—the comfort, the security, and the protection, the insulation from those who are not like us.

Now, let’s be clear, solving the problem of poverty isn’t just a matter of money, either, as if we could bridge the chasm between the rich and the poor *simply* by those with money giving it to those who don’t. Would it have helped if the rich man had tossed a coin out his window to the poor man now and then? What if he had made a little “to-go plate” for the pitiful beggar, would God have said, “Well done, good and faithful servant?” Not likely.

As the Lutheran theologian Jürgen Moltmann observes: “The opposite of poverty is not property. Rather, the opposite of both is community.” The opposite of poverty isn’t property, the opposite of both poverty and property is community.

What Moltman meant by this may not be immediately obvious, so let me tell you a story that illustrates what he was getting at. In 1942, Clarence Jordan, who had studied agriculture and then theology, attempted a shocking experiment in living the gospel by founding Koinonia Farm outside Americus, Georgia. Blacks and whites lived together, embodying the kind of community described in Acts, where fellowship (which is what *koinonia* means in Greek) involved communal sharing of all goods. Not everyone approved of Jordan’s little social experiment—folks like the Klu Klux Klan repeatedly terrorized the farm and its residents. But Jordan’s vision endured and ended up inspiring many others.

Among the many impacted by Jordan was a fellow named Millard Fuller. Fuller wound up at Koinonia by accident, trying to save his marriage. In November of 1965, Millard’s wife Linda

told him she was leaving him. So absorbed was he in his business, making the unheard-of sum of one million dollars a year, that Fuller had not noticed his wife was slipping away. It was a wake-up call to Millard. His own *Sliding Doors* moment. He piled his wife and their children into their Lincoln Continental and set off for Florida. On the way they met up in Georgia with some friends who had joined the Koinonia community. Millard agreed to have lunch with Jordan, whereupon he confessed he felt this tremendous heaviness in his chest. Jordan responded that "a million dollars can weigh awfully burdensome on a man." Jordan then diagnosed Fuller as a "money-ac," as someone who was addicted to money, just as one can be addicted to drugs or alcohol.

Jordan was fond of saying, "What the poor need is not charity but capital, not caseworkers but coworkers. And what the rich need is a wise, honorable, and just way of divesting themselves of their overabundance." After his lunch with Jordan, Fuller divested himself of his wealth honorably and founded Habitat for Humanity. Habitat for Humanity is a Christian housing ministry, committed to building "simple, decent, and affordable" homes for low-income families. Since 1976 Habitat has engaged millions of volunteers in building more than 800,000 homes for the working poor throughout America and in such far-flung locations as South Africa, Hungary, Ireland, and Honduras. Through Habitat, Millard and countless others have demonstrated how the opposite of poverty—and the opposite of wealth—is community.

The parable of Lazarus and the rich man is a difficult story to swallow, I know. You don't have to live in a 5,000 square foot mansion in Manhattan to feel a sting after hearing this story. Jesus' parable presents a challenge to the wealthy—and that includes all of us—a challenge regarding what we do with our wealth. But we should remember: this story is *for* us, not *against* us. Jesus tells this story not to condemn us but because he cannot stand it when we love the things we get for ourselves more than we love the things God wants to give us. When we are satisfied with linen suits and sumptuous feasts when God wants to give us the kingdom. When we are content to live in the world with beggars when God wants to give us brothers and sisters. God wants more for us than to make us wealthy. He wants to make us family, to bring us into a new community, composed of those who once were rich and those who once were poor, the have and have-nots, living together in the bizarre new world of God's Kingdom and possessing a joy no amount of money could ever buy. Thanks be to God!