

Proper 21 Year C

“And at his gate was a poor man named Lazarus, full of sores, who desired to be fed.”

Well Luke is still at it!....He continues his socio-economic rhetorical diatribe by continuing to persist in his reversal of fortune theme. I'm kind of getting tired of it....These are yet more of those so-called uncomfortable words coming from Jesus....uncomfortable if one is rich, of course...and relative to the world that's all of us....Reversal of fortune...the abused raised up and the proud scattered...the last becoming first and the first last...we in the industrialized West are not called first worlders for nothing... This theme a drum beat in this narrative. Luke has prophesied early on in his gospel, warned us, as it were, what this gospel was going to be like...In Mary's song, a thematic preamble, we are told of this socio-economic reversal wherein the poor are filled with good things and the callous rich are sent away empty....a little later Luke continues with Jesus' conversation with the Jewish leadership at table, a teaching in the context of the meal, a meal the heart of the culture....you remember from a few weeks ago, Jesus rearranging the prescriptive seating order...questioning the honor and dishonor of hierarchy....and then if that weren't enough he says to the assembly that even the outcasts are invited to the feast, tax agents, prostitutes, sinners, drunks...the lame and the sick...the unclean of our world.

And then in our passage today Jesus turns up the heat and convicts the wealthy leadership of not properly using their wealth...that their use of wealth is self serving only...that their use of wealth is an escape from the needs of the world...the needs of the world just outside the gate...I'm sure there are individual exceptions, but on the whole wealth as collective and institutional, generally gets misused to the detriment of those without it...at least that is what history has shown.

This motif of reversal of fortune has been around since stories began to be told....Joseph in Egypt...Jacob and Esau....Aladdin in the Arabian nights....Mark Twain's, the Prince and the Pauper, a Christmas Carol by Dickens...the movie Trading Places, still one of my favorites, Shakespeare's the Tempest...there is something in the human psyche that wants, yearns for the world to be turned into what it is intended to be, the right world hidden amid the world gone

wrong....waiting to be born....waiting for things to be set right... But please hear this:...these stories of reversal of fortune are not about vengeance as one might think... They are about restoration, transformation and renewal...they are good news stories about the world being made right. And our reading today is no exception....It is a good news story...if we read this parable as a story of redemption and not a story of threat, then I think we might make some good sense of it...but alas we have Augustine and Calvin to thank for our compulsion to read this story as a story of personal salvation and the threat of hell...we're over that aren't we?!

So let's treat this parable as one about good news (after all that's what gospel means)...parables often make us uncomfortable, disturb us, pull at our seams... so that they may hit us over the head with good news.... and the other thing I would ask of us in our reading this text, is let us hear this parable as directed toward a people and not an individual...this story is not about greedy ole me...it is a story about a greedy ole people, a story about a society infected with greed and the violence greed begets...and in Luke's case it is the people of Israel...The rich man feasting sumptuously every day is the leadership and the corrupt well to do of Israel...and Lazarus of course is the poor and the sick among them....Perhaps another way to say this is that God is not interested in personal salvation...God is interested in the salvation of all God's people...salvation meaning being raised to dignity....and according to Genesis 17, and to Paul that ultimately means all the people of the world....all who lie in indignity outside the gate of blessing....and moreover, salvation is also for the ones inside the gate, the rewarded as well...so this story is about the relationship between the two... the haves and the have nots...and about the way to effect this reconciliation....and how that reconciliation becomes the most important thing of all there is to God and therefore to us...that is why this parable moves from the mundane kitchen as metaphor and becomes a story of heaven and Hell...cosmic proportions explicit now....Luke is raising the stakes....Luke is saying that the reconciliation between the calloused rich man, who ironically here is nameless, with the one named Lazarus....that this reconciliation between the rich man...the ones of wealth and power... and Lazarus...the poor among us, the shamed...Luke is saying that this envisioned reconciliation, this very birth of God's commonweal...God's *common-wealth*....that the bringing to birth of this new creation is what the whole of Torah, the whole of the gospels

are all about.... “Hear O Israel: Love the Lord your God, which is to say...love your neighbor as you love yourself; on these two laws hang all the law and the prophets” reconciliation...God’s modus operandi and therefore ours...and if nothing is done...If we don’t hear what our ancestors of the Spirit have taught us... then a great chasm, a great abyss, will forever fracture the human community...the human community which is the very body of Christ....a broken community, a broken world...hell on earth in truth....Lazarus resides in the bosom of Abraham, his rightful place in the reversal in our story, but heaven is no heaven without the other....the great irony of ironies in this parable is that heaven is not complete without the thawed heart of the rich man....another surprising reversal.

And Luke laments, grieves....as Moses grieved for his people and their self serving ways and their lostness and namelessness in the desert... grief that even one come back from the dead couldn’t convince them of the way they are supposed to live....the way we are supposed to live for the sake of heaven and earth....and for the sake of the God who moves among us...who loves us....and grieves.

But we do know the way...we know the way....We don’t need to be hit over the head by a parable...or maybe we do...maybe being reminded time and again is a good thing.... so why don’t we turn this world upside down...through our artful brothering, through our artful sistering...through our sharing abundant wealth among the Lazaruses among us....sharing as a people,... the possibilities of God’s transforming love.... Not as a person, but as communities of faith in artful collaborative practice of Torah... the Right Way... which in our corner of the world of faith, is the way of The Christ... We too the anointed ones on the way of inclusion and embrace....of compassion for the least among us....champions of justice... on the way of forgiving seventy times seven....the way of creative conversation and hospitality....and the way of peace, not useless violence....Luke is making a pitch to society in general about how we live together....critiquing his world...offering as alternative the time honored way of the truth....That is why providing food and water to people...and healthcare...and equitable taxation....and serving the dignity of our neighbor...are all matters of faith... how we do that is all about the imaginative hard work among us with all due humility and respect....This challenge is daunting to be sure, especially with the childish and churlish political climate we find ourselves in....We

certainly have no easy answers...But meanwhile, the Chasm that divides the human community becomes as we speak ever more fixed...and more tongues are parched...and the sick and poor man lies at the gate being tended to by no one but the dogs....up and against a sumptuous feast... a feast attended by a few, but meant for all.

I think this story convicts all manner of leadership, I think this story convicts the church...I think this story convicts our educational institutions, financial institutions, our state, our nation and our world....I think this story means that in every aspect of the human enterprise...that our brothering.... our sistering those outside the gate to a place at the table will transform the Mt. Everest of the challenge that besets us....that the practice of the good and the true will begin the healing of the chasm, unfixing it; healing the deep wound of our world. I believe that every act, every iota of goodness will scale this mountain...make the mountain a plain Isaiah insists...such is the alchemy of God....dare we believe that; dare we believe that?

Since the written word began in every single world culture and religion, we have been told by the wise ones come before...we have been told the secret of the universe...and that is that we take care of each other...That we take good care of each other....a secret simple and profound...and we will see, I believe with all my heart, that what we've been told is true...that the world will be made whole....the universe turning still towards her perfection...perhaps as soon as now....We know this...We have this knowledge in our very DNA....May this knowledge become fruitful practice....And may it not take word come back from the dead, yet again, to make it so.