

Don't Stop Believing

In this morning's Gospel passage, Jesus tells the second of two parables that begin, "There was a rich man ..." The first parable, which we heard last week, quickly shifts focus from that rich man to his dishonest steward. Today's parable stays with this rich man from life through death and beyond. Jesus describes the man suffering in the fires of Hell, unable to get so much as a drop of water to cool his tongue. But we're to understand that this man deserves his fate. He has indulged himself day after day with expensive clothing and sumptuous food, ignoring the wretched beggar Lazarus who lay, sick and starving, at his very gate. The rich man wasn't actively evil, but he failed to care for his needy neighbor. That lack of compassion earned him an eternity of torment according to no less illustrious a soul than Father Abraham himself. Abraham isn't needlessly cruel to the suffering man. He simply explains that the good things poor people are denied in this life are granted to them in the next, and vice versa. The rich man has enjoyed his good things. Now, it's time for Lazarus to enjoy his, and for the formerly rich man to suffer the consequences of his indifference.

We can wonder if Jesus told last week's parable of the dishonest steward for the benefit of the Pharisees who eavesdropped on his dinner conversation. This week, there can be no doubt. Luke tells us that the Pharisees, who are "lovers of money," ridicule Jesus for last week's parable. He responds by firing today's parable right back at them. According to Jesus, rich people who pamper themselves with no regard for their less fortunate neighbors can expect no blessing in Heaven. It's not their wealth that condemns them. It's their lack of concern for their fellow children of God.

This week's parable makes me a smidge uncomfortable because it strikes a little too close to home. As a professional woman in 21st Century America, I devote considerable time and

resources to making sure that my family and I live comfortable lives. Yes, I donate to charity, but every time I buy someone an expensive gift, indulge in a new book or treat my family to a night out, part of me wonders if I'm doing too much for my loved ones and myself when I should be doing more for those who have less. In the next world, my conversation with Father Abraham may be a little uncomfortable. I'll leave you to imagine how your own might go.

But today, I want to focus on the second half of this parable. Having been told that he can expect no relief from his torment, the rich man again asks Abraham for help. It may be too late for him, but he has five surviving brothers who are apparently leading the same kind of self-indulgent lives that he once did. The wealthy man asks Abraham to send Lazarus to his brothers, hoping that the vision of the poor beggar risen from the dead will shock them into repentance.

There are several problems with the rich man's request. His compassion remains selfishly narrow, fixed on his immediate family. He never considers what returning to the living world might cost Lazarus. In fact, he doesn't speak directly to Lazarus at all. Despite his torment, the rich man remains so proud that he engages only with Israel's great patriarch, Abraham. His asking Abraham to have Lazarus bring him water or to appear to his brothers is a little like one Fortune 500 CEO asking another to have his intern deliver a package and bring back Starbucks while he's at it. Although their circumstances have been completely reversed, the rich man still doesn't realize that Lazarus is every bit as worthy as himself, a beloved child of God who deserves at least as much respect as the rich man does, and probably a great deal more.

Most important, the rich man tries to use the shock value of resurrection to change his brothers' hearts and minds. Abraham points out that the brothers already have Moses and the prophets to guide them. They shouldn't need to be shocked into compassion. What the rich man doesn't admit is that he also had Moses and the prophets in his lifetime, but he ignored their

command to be generous with the poor. With this parable, Jesus calls out the rich, contemptuous Pharisees for imagining that their wealth is proof that God prefers them to those who have less. The Old Testament contains plenty of passages urging those who are more fortunate to share with those who are not. God's special concern for the poor is a theme that runs through both books of the Bible. The rich man, his brothers and the Pharisees all should know better.

Abraham knows, though the rich man apparently doesn't, that shock rarely inspires a true change of heart. As the patriarch wisely observes, people who can't be bothered to listen to Moses and the prophets won't be convinced "even if someone rises from the dead." In this, I hear a foreshadowing of Jesus's resurrection. Those who ignore the wisdom of God as spoken by the Holy Spirit through Moses and the prophets won't be convinced by Jesus's resurrection, either. They'll invent a million reasons not to believe so they can continue to live as they please.

Human beings are an incredibly adaptive species. It's mostly an evolutionary advantage, because it allows humanity to survive and propagate even under rapidly changing or hazardous conditions. But one of the unfortunate side effects of human adaptability is that we can get used to almost anything. Extreme circumstances, even miracles, quickly lose their ability to shock.

In the parable, Jesus put Lazarus at the rich man's gate. But even if he lay dying on the rich man's doorstep, familiarity might deaden the man's conscience to the point where he'd step right over the beggar's body, perhaps muttering under his breath about the inconvenience. Honestly, if the man was going to starve to death, couldn't he do it somewhere else?

If that sounds a bit exaggerated to you, let's talk about Hurricane Fiona, which just flooded poor Puerto Rico – again – before moving north to devastate the Atlantic coast of Canada. Or what about the unnatural wildfires that have been creating havoc around the world? From the Great Northwest to Europe to the Amazon rainforest to Australia, fires have destroyed

millions of acres, demolished homes and killed or injured scores of people and untold numbers of animals and birds. And yet, perhaps because the changing climate does so much damage day after day, too many of us have become numb to it or even deny that it's happening. The human heart can only hold so much grief. Better to turn our attention elsewhere and keep putting one foot in front of the other, adapting as best we can to our changing circumstances and hoping that someone else will figure out what to do.

But, listening to this morning's parable, I hear Jesus telling us that we cannot allow ourselves to adjust to tragedy. We are to resist the temptation to make ourselves so busy with our own affairs that we can't see what's happening in the world around us. We are to let our hearts break and break again until they break open enough to contain the suffering of others. We are to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit urging us to share what we have and do what we can to help. Above all, we are never, ever to become so accustomed to the priceless gift of Jesus's resurrection that we take him or our brothers and sisters in Christ for granted. God willingly endured an abominable death for us. It's important never to get entirely comfortable with that.

Jesus told this parable because he loved the Pharisees. He wanted them to listen to the Word of God, believe and do better. I think he wants the same from us. Jesus wasn't asking the Pharisees to eradicate all poverty in the world, any more than he's asking us to restore the Earth to its pristine, pre-Industrial Age condition. Jesus doesn't demand that we do impossible things. But he does, I think, ask us to do what we can with what we have, and to consider once in a while whether we're really doing as much as we would if we hadn't adapted to the tragedies and injustices around us. He's asking us to pay attention, to feel, to care, to believe that there *is* a God and that his instructions to us matter. Then, we can do our best with what we have and trust Jesus to take care of the rest. Like the old rock song says, "don't stop believing." *Amen.*