

### OPEN THE GATE

Here we go again! Jesus tells yet another story that makes us squirm and feel uncomfortable because it's about money and what we do or don't do with our resources in terms of helping those in need. We really shouldn't be surprised at so many repeated cautions about the riches we possess, which, in turn, can possess us. After all, sprinkled throughout the Bible there are about 908 verses that speak on the pitfalls of wealth. Jim Wallis, who is an evangelical social activist, said that one time he went through his Bible and decided to cut out all of the verses that had to do with the problem of riches. He ended up with a Bible completely in shreds. He said if you take those certain verses about the dangers of wealth out of the Bible, you don't have much Bible left.

At the end of last week's scripture lesson, we heard Jesus say, "No slave can serve two masters... you cannot serve God and wealth." In the very next verse, Luke records that "the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed Jesus." Their mocking response prompted Jesus to tell this parable about the rich man and Lazarus. (11:00 a.m. worship service – read Luke 16:19-31)

Clarence Jordan called the parables "Trojan horses." Open the door, let it in, and then bam, it's got you. This particular parable is all about a door (or a gate) that never got opened. There are some interesting features to note about this story. If we were playing the biblical version of the game, Trivial Pursuit, and the question was "What is the only parable Jesus told in which a main character has a name?" the answer would be the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Over the centuries, the rich man was given the name, Dives, which isn't really his name; rather, the Latin Vulgate for the word "rich" is dives; thus, the adjective rich was turned into a proper name. Then, there is also Abraham, who figures in the latter part of the story.

As you have heard me say before, one way to better understand or define the nature of something is by stating what it is not. To begin with, Jesus' story really isn't against wealth per se. He doesn't have it in for persons with possessions or property. After all, when you stop and think about it, money is neutral; it is not good or bad in and of itself. Rather, it's what we do with our money, how we use or don't use it that determines whether it is a blessing or an evil. Furthermore, while the story talks about the life to come – what happens after we die – the focus of the story is not on the hereafter, but rather, on the here and now – how we live our lives right now and how we treat others. Finally, the Pharisees, the rich man "Dives," (and even some today) believed that material prosperity was a sign of God's blessing and approval while poverty was surely due to the person's sin, which resulted in some type of punishment or affliction sent by God. If you carry that line of reasoning out further then the rich should not lift a finger to help the poor for fear of interfering with God's wrath on those who deserve to suffer. Jesus refutes that kind of thinking; it's way off base and clearly out of touch with what God wills for people.

Taking note of what Jesus' story is not saying, it is time to understand the point that Jesus wants to get across to all who hear this parable. It's quite clear that the rich man had it all. He dressed like a king ("in purple and fine linen"), and he ate like a king as he feasted sumptuously every day. Just outside his gate lay the poor man Lazarus, whose condition was pitiful. Evidently, while the rich man must have seen Lazarus outside his gate, he never opened the gate to go out to see about Lazarus and he never invited Lazarus in to his realm of influence. The sin of the rich man was not that he was rich, but that he was so absorbed in himself and that he never

cared. He never made the choice to open the gate and cross “the great divide” between himself and Lazarus. And, because the rich man was so uncaring, to the needs of the poor, the hungry, the ill, the outcasts of the world – because he simply did not care enough and could not be bothered with their problems – the rich man’s gate, in turn, became a prison door.

Just as there was a disconnect between the rich man’s wealth and the opportunity at hand to minister to Lazarus’ needs, when both men died, there was an even greater chasm between the two! They went to Hades, which is understood as the Old Testament’s Sheol, the place for the dead until the final judgment. There was a reversal of fortunes as the tables were turned. Lazarus went to be with Father Abraham and “Dives” didn’t. Lazarus was in the lap of comfort, and Dives was in torment.

Dives wanted Abraham to send Lazarus to do his bidding, to fetch some water and cool his tongue. After all, it was hot as Hades down there. But Abraham said nothing doing. Besides, there was a great chasm between them and “ne’er the twain shall meet.” The rich man, who separated himself from Lazarus on earth by his neglect, had fashioned his own chasm, his own self-enforced isolation, in the life beyond.

When Dives saw that there was no point in pursuing his first request, he changed tactics and pleaded with Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his five brothers back on earth so that they didn’t end up with the same fate as Dives. But Abraham turned down this request as well for someone had already warned them - Moses and the prophets. And, since the brothers didn’t heed the words of the Lawgiver and the prophets, they surely wouldn’t pay attention to someone who would rise up from the dead.

What we discover in this parable is a message not only intended for the Pharisees of Jesus’ time but also for the church in every age. We find our place in this parable where the five brothers are concerned. Jesus tells us this story to warn us. We have the scriptures and, by the grace of God, we have Jesus, who came back from the dead. And, we have this parable. All these things serve as our reminders of God’s coming kingdom, of a just God whose nature is to turn the tables on injustice, a God who extends no mercy to those who themselves extend no mercy. In fact, we are better off than the five brothers because we have more information than they did. The question is: What will we do with it?

God demands that we do far more than simply listen to Moses and the prophets, to Jesus and this parable. God requires that we participate in the ongoing story of God’s concern for the poor. God desires that we open the gate, reach out to those in need, and share what we have. If Dives and his five brothers had listened to and lived out the scriptures – that justice be done for the poor, that something be left over from the harvest so that the hungry may have food, that the people of Israel be open-handed toward the needy in the midst, that what the Lord wants from the people is not a fast but to share bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house – then Dives and his brothers would have realized that Lazarus, who was outside the gate, was yet a seventh brother and they should have gladly welcomed him and ministered to him. So also, Jesus reminds every Christian in every age, “As you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family (your sisters and your brothers), you did it to me. And, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.”

Jesus’ parable is a wake-up call to us, a call to tend to and open the gate. It is a call to look at our lives and our gifts and to share what we have. Each one of us has to decide what this story means to us personally, and if and how we will respond accordingly. Also, within this First Presbyterian Church, our community of faith continues to hear and heed this message about how

we can best use all that God has given to us, as well as the riches entrusted to us by those, who have gone before us.

The story of Lazarus and Dives and the chasm between them in Hades reminds me of another story, which is fitting for next Sunday is World Communion Sunday. An old priest, who was dying, composed himself on his bed and said a prayer for the repose of his soul. He was troubled about heaven and hell. What were they like? God knows he has spent a lifetime preaching about both places. Now, in his old age, he wasn't so sure. Dimly, he saw two figures at the foot of his bed. He knew who they were; the tall one was Moses and the other was Peter the fisherman. When they beckoned to the priest, he got up and followed them, walking through the wall of his bedroom.

Silently, they led him through the galaxies of the night sky. In a far-off place, they stopped before a big house. "The kingdom of God is made of many mansions," Peter explained. "So too is hell. Step inside. We will show you the first room of Satan's palace." As the priest walked in, his ears were assaulted by a babble of complaints. Many people were seated around a large table. In the center there was a big pot of the priest's favorite dish, beef stew. Although everyone in hell had a spoon and could reach the pot, the people were starving. The spoon handles that they held in their hands were twice as long as their arms. They could catch the stew, but they couldn't bring it to their lips. The cries of the starving were so loud that the priest begged to be taken away.

Peter and Moses took him to another mansion in a faraway place. Moses invited the priest to step inside the outer room of Paradise. There the priest saw a similar large table surrounded by many people. In the center was a huge pot of beef stew. The spoon handles were too long for human arms, but there was no cries or complaints. No one was starving because, here, all the people were feeding each other. (Told by Jim Bishop, Reader's Digest, September 1977, p. 109)

Let those who have ears hear for this is the Word of God. Amen.

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