

Proper 21 C Sermon
Luke 16:19-31
September 25, 2022

“The Power of a Name”
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

¹⁹“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²²The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’ ²⁵But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. ²⁶Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’ ²⁷He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house— ²⁸for I have five brothers— that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ ²⁹Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ ³⁰He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ ³¹He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

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A little girl was talking to her teacher about whales. At one point in the discussion, the teacher remarked that it was physically impossible for a whale to swallow an entire human being because, even though the whale was a very large mammal, its throat was very small. “But the whale swallowed Jonah,” the little girl insisted. Irritated, the teacher reiterated that a whale could not swallow a human. It was physically impossible, she said. The little girl said, “When I get to heaven, I will ask Jonah.” The teacher asked, “What if Jonah went to hell?” The little girl replied, “Then you ask him.”¹

I remember our text from Luke’s gospel well from childhood. It’s the one that paints such a clear picture of heaven and of hell and details the roadmap of how to get there. I remember sitting in church, listening to the preacher tell us how we’d literally be able to look across the chasm at the suffering of those in Hades. I remember thinking about those flames and about being so parched that a drop of water would likely just sizzle when it hit the tongue. The moral of this parable, according to our preacher, was simple. You can’t buy your way out of hell. Only faith in Jesus can do that.

The problem with this interpretation is that faith in Jesus is little more than fire insurance. And, to be honest, I don’t think this parable tells us ANYTHING about the afterlife. Interpreting this as a story about heaven and hell or, as the text calls it, the bosom of Abraham and Hades, takes all the focus off of what the story is really about. Don’t worry, I’ll tell you what *I* think it’s about before we’re all done. But first, I’d like you to imagine that you are one of the characters in the story. Who would you be? . . . We’ll come back to that, but right now I’d like to point out just a few interesting details about this parable.

Firstly, it’s interesting that the poor man in this story has a name—Lazarus. “Jesus told upwards of 40 parables in the New Testament. Each

¹ Marlo Thomas. “Joke: A Whale Tale,” Huffpost.com, December 6, 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/marlo-thomas-laugh-of-the-day_n_1743785.

had a small cast of characters: waiting fathers and prodigal sons, women baking bread and laborers in a vineyard. But only once did Jesus assign a character a name: it was the poor man, Lazarus. Jesus knew that if we treat people only by categories like “the poor,” it is too easy to mistreat them, to forget who they really are. But Jesus knew that each such person has a name, a family, a story. Giving Lazarus a name brought forward the humanity of ‘the poor.’”² The name ‘Lazarus’ comes from the Hebrew name Eleazar and means “God has helped.” While the rich man in the story seems to have completely ignored Lazarus, Jesus gives him a name in order to illustrate his significance—at least to God.

Secondly, despite the fact that he ignored Lazarus, the rich man clearly knew him. When he opened his eyes in Hades, he looked across that chasm and recognized Lazarus and identified him by name. And despite the obvious fact that he was being punished and Lazarus was being rewarded, he still had the gall to ask Abraham to send Lazarus into the flames with a drop of water to cool the rich man’s tongue. Even in death, even in judgement, the rich man would never see Lazarus as his equal.

Thirdly and finally, the rich man feared that his brothers, and perhaps sisters too, would suffer the same fate in Hades. Still seeing Lazarus as an inferior to be ordered around or ignored completely at his pleasure, he begged Abraham to send him, to his father’s house to warn them, like the ghosts of Christmases past, present, and future haunting an unrepentant Ebenezer Scrooge. Abraham, though, reminded him that if they wouldn’t listen to Moses and the prophets, they wouldn’t listen to a dead man brought back to life. This last bit is especially important because the author of Luke’s gospel understood Jesus’ teaching to be a reiteration of that of Moses and the prophets before him. Perhaps this was also a warning that those who ignored them would likely ignore Jesus—even a resurrected Christ.

²Scott Hoezee. “Luke 16:19-31 Commentary,” Cephreaching.org, September 29, 2019, <https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/proper-21c-2/>.

And that's the end of the story. I'm still wondering, if we were characters in the story, who would *we* be? You see, I don't think this is a story about heaven and hell—about the afterlife—I think this is a story about how we're to go about living life itself. The rich man, Lazarus, even Abraham are all dead, but we're not. We must be, then, the sisters and brothers to which Moses and the prophets and Jesus have come. But, what is their message for us?

Based on this morning's reading, I think it's something like this: human suffering is not just a faceless mass of unmet need. It is a particular hungry child. It is a specific elderly person who can't afford their medication. It is a certain young person who can't make ends meet. It is an exact parent seeking a better life for their family. Human suffering is not just a faceless mass of unmet need. It is individual people with names—like Lazarus—and we, their human siblings, are called to see them and know them, to name them and serve them, as we are able. Moses, the prophets, and Jesus himself couldn't make it any clearer if they came back from the dead and told us to our faces.

This parable is not a story about heaven and hell—about the afterlife—it's a story about how we're meant to live this life. But, when we look at all the suffering in the world, it's so easy to get overwhelmed. An interesting study was published a few years ago which illustrates the way people ignore global suffering because they feel bad for not being able to do enough. Researchers found that “if people feel that they cannot make a difference they do not bother to try. They feel their actions to change the world are not efficacious, they will not bring a powerful result, so they retreat.” However, researchers also found that when faced with a particular scenario of one person's suffering, people tried twice as hard to alleviate that person's suffering than when confronted by an entire faceless mass of unmet need. Why? Because they felt like they could help the one.³

³ Rebecca Savastio. “People Ignore Global Suffering Because It Makes Them Feel Bad Study Says,” Guardianlv.com, November 10, 2014, <https://guardianlv.com/2014/11/people-ignore-global-suffering-because-it-makes-them-feel-bad-study-says/>.

Maybe that's why Jesus gave the poor, hungry, lame man in this story a name—to remind us that the rich man, while unable to provide for all the unmet needs of the world, could've helped Lazarus. Have you ever felt like the problems of this community and our world are just too big to tackle? Have you ever felt like all of this church's talk about changing the world just couldn't stack up in the face of so much suffering? Have you ever felt so defeated by the scope of the "problem" that you couldn't even get motivated to start addressing it?

Psychologists call that pseudoinefficacy—the "idea that people are less willing to help one person when they are made aware of the broader scope of people in need that they are not helping."⁴ Whether Jesus knew anything about the psychology of pseudoinefficacy or not, he gave us a powerful story to combat it. We may not be able to help entire categories of "the poor" or "the sick" or "the disenfranchised," but we can help Lazarus. We can all make a difference in the lives of someone with unmet needs.

Who will be Lazarus for us this week? Will we listen to the voices of Moses and the prophets and Jesus calling out to us to help even this one?

May it be so. Amen.

⁴"Pseudoinefficacy," arithmeticofcompassion.org, <https://www.arithmeticofcompassion.org/pseudoinefficacy>.