THE GREAT REVERSAL

LUKE 16:19-31
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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SEPTEMBER 29, 2013/19TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Jesus was a storyteller.

I think Jesus told stories as opposed to other, more didactic methods of teaching, because he knew that stories draw us in, they evoke reactions and response, they move us in ways that nothing else can.

There are many parts of this story that we could focus on today. Some will instantly be drawn to the depiction of hell in this passage. Others will focus on the figure of Abraham and his symbolic significance.

When I hear this story, I am instantly drawn to this image of a "chasm" that cannot be crossed that separates Lazarus from the rich man, both in this life and in the life to come.

Many of us have seen places and people, instances of poverty and suffering and human neglect and mistreatment that break *our* hearts.

When I read the story this week, my mind returned to Colombia, and the displaced, forgotten people I saw living on the hillside south of Bogota.

It also brought to mind a book that I read earlier this year by Katherine Boo. The book is called *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, and it tells the story of the invisible, disposable families that live in a slum called "Annawadi" which exists right beside the airport of the bustling, modernizing, growing ultramodern metropolis of Mumbai, India.

I want to read you a passage from this book. I want you to listen with the story of Lazarus and the rich man in mind.

The book captures the reality of "invisible people" and experience of what it must be like to feel worthless—like "Lazarus"—better than anything I have come across in quite some time.

Abdul and his neighbors were squatting on land that belonged to the Airports Authority of India. Only a coconut-tree-lined thoroughfare separated the slum from the entrance to the international terminal. Serving the airport clientele, and encircling Annawadi, were five extravagant hotels; four ornate, marbly megaliths and one sleek blue-glass Hyatt, from the top-floor windows of which Annawadi and several adjacent squatter settlements looked like villages that had been airdropped into gaps between elegant modernities.

"Everything around us is roses," is how Abdul's younger brother, Mirchi put it. "And we're the s@t in between."*

In the new century, as India's economy grew faster than any other but China's, pink condominiums and glass office towers had shot up near the international airport. One corporate office was names, simply, "More." More cranes for making more buildings, the tallest of which interfered with the landing of more and more planes: It was a smogged-out, prosperity-driven obstacle course up there in the overcity, from which wads of possibility had tumbled down to the slums.

Every morning, thousands of waste-pickers fanned out across the airport area in search of vendible excess—a few pounds of the eight thousand tons of garbage the Mumbai was extruding daily. These scavengers darted after crumpled cigarette packs tossed from cars with tinted windows. They dredged sewers and raided dumpsters for empty bottles of water and beer. Each evening, they returned down the slum road with gunny sacks of garbage on their backs…

[Abdul] been sorting since he was about six years old, because tuberculosis and garbage-sorting had wrecked his father's lungs. Abdul's motor skills had developed around his labor.

"You didn't have mind for school anyway," his father had recently observed. Abdul wasn't sure he'd had enough schooling to make a judgment either way. In the early years, he'd sat in a classroom where nothing happened. Then there had only been work. Work that churned so much filth into the air that it turned his

snot black. Work more boring than dirty. Work he expected to be doing for the rest of his life.[1]

The title of the book poignantly captures the tragedy and the irony of this reality.

It is a reference to a brightly colored advertisement for floor tiles repeating "Beautiful Forever" across a wall that shuts out Annawadi from the view of travelers leaving the airport.

This is what I think of when I hear Jesus' words about a "great chasm" between the rich and the poor, that cannot (or will not) be crossed.

Our text this week begins with the same words that began our text last week:

There was a rich man…

It's no coincidence that Jesus begins his story this way in this context. A few verses earlier, we read that the Pharisees, *who were lovers of money*, were hanging around Jesus, listening to his teachings, sneering, ridiculing, mocking.

It's no coincidence that this parable and the previous one about stewardship and our inability to serve both God and money are told in the company of those who sought constantly to justify themselves and their privilege.

What was the rich man's sin in Jesus' story?

We're not told. At least not explicitly.

We're not told that he deliberately mistreated Lazarus. We're not told that he hurled abuse at him or that he kicked him as he walked by outside his gate. We're not told that he despised Lazarus or thought that he was impure or unclean.

Any or all of these things *could* be true. But we're not specifically told.

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[1] Katherine Boo, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death and Hope in a Mumbai Slum* (London: Portobello, 2012), xii-xiii.

[2] David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its*

We're also not told why the rich man responds as he does from Hades. Why does he want Lazarus to touch his *tongue* with water? Why not his feet or his hands or his head?

Is it because our tongues are such potent instruments for bringing good and evil (as James reminds us in James 3)? Is it because sometimes all it takes is a kind word or a verbal expression of common humanity to bridge the gap between "invisible" and "unworthy" to "visible" and "valuable?"

We're not told.

What we *are* given is simply a picture of Lazarus's poverty and his longing—even for a scrap from the rich man's table.

Perhaps the silence regarding the precise nature of the rich man's sins is *itself* meant to speak volumes.

This was how he treated the rich man. Utter silence. Lazarus didn't even exist.

Just like the slum dwellers in Annawadi, shielded by advertisements and concrete, Lazarus was something less than human—he was deemed unworthy of concern or care by those with power, status, influence, and respect.

I think that the chief sin of the rich man in this story was his utter failure to notice another human being, and to acknowledge, even in some very small way, his value, his common humanity as a child of God.

It is a sin with dire consequences. He finds himself in torment and agony. The same chasm that he refused to cross in his earthly life—the chasm of invisibility that separated him from Lazarus at his gate—now separates him from God in the next life.

It is a sin that he has no excuse for. He should have known, from the law and the prophets, Jesus says, that the God of Israel, the God of heaven and earth has always commanded the care for the poor, the widow, the orphan, the alien, the outsider.

This charge rings down from Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy, down through the prophets, and reaches its climax in Jesus' teaching and actions itself.

You must love your neighbour as yourself…

We are also given the image of a great and final reversal whereby the first are last and the last first, just as Jesus promised in Matthew 20 in the parable of the workers in the vineyard…

… where the poor, the hungry, the persecuted, the ones who weep and mourn *really do* inherit the kingdom of God, as Jesus promised in Matthew 5 and Luke 6.

We must never forget how utterly revolutionary this great reversal would have seemed in its original context.

The Eastern Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart devotes an entire chapter in his book, *Atheist Delusions* to the way in which early Christianity overturned the social norms of its day.

The world in which the gospel took root was manifestly *not* one in which it was assumed that all human beings had value, regardless of their ethnicity or social station. There was a very clear hierarchy in this world, and only those at the top of the pile were even considered persons before the law.

Slaves, women, peasants… all of these and others were considered of no consequence in the ancient world.

It took the revolution of the gospel to change this, building upon the Law and the Prophets. Here's what Hart says:

> *The Christian vision of reality was nothing less than… a complete revision of the moral and conceptual categories by which human beings were to understand themselves and one another and their places in the world.*
>
> *It was—… to use Nietzsche's words, but without his sneer—a "slave revolt in morality." But it was also, as far as Christians were concerned, a slave revolt "from above," if such a thing could be imagined; for it had been accomplished by*

> *a savior who had… willingly exchanged the "form of God" for the "form of a slave," and had thereby overthrown the powers that reigned on high.*[2]

In other words, the first followers of Jesus turned the world upside down and have been doing it ever since.

Not perfectly, of course. There have always been times where Christians have not been very good at *keeping* the world turned upside down. There have been times when Christians have participated in the very power and class dynamics that Jesus critiques and exposes in his life and teaching.

But the idea that *all* people have worth is one of the deepest and most profound legacies that our world has inherited from the story of Israel, the story of Jesus, and the story of the church.

It was not always like this. Indeed, it is *still* not like this in many parts of the world today.

But the church ***has*** been and ***continues*** to be a force for good in this regard.

We should not be embarrassed to celebrate this, even as we recognize how short of the ideal we still fall, even as we must continually take up the challenge to do better.

Both the story of Lazarus and the rich man and the story of Abdul in the slums of Mumbai are quite remote from where we sit here in Canada.

We are not confronted by this kind of stark poverty here. We have social programs and charities and food banks and soup kitchens and addictions counseling and all kinds of other services for the poor among us.

We support worthy causes that do good work around the world, in places far more difficult than our own.

Are we off the hook? Does the parable have anything to say to us?

I think it absolutely does.

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[2] David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 171,

A question: *Why did the rich man in this parable not notice or ignore Lazarus?*

Did he disdain the poor? Maybe. Or was he too important? Too busy?

Did he have important meetings, places to be, people to see?

It's hard to notice/pay attention to those on the margins, those who are struggling, when we are busy.

I listened to a program on CBC this week that talked about how modern North Americans are becoming chronically over busy.

Many of our lives are scheduled down to the half hour. We are constantly running here and there and everywhere for meetings and deadlines and appointments for our kids and the list goes on and on.

And every spare moment when we are not running, we are checking our phones and other devices to make sure we're not missing anything!

The other day Claire saw a young man walking down the street with his nose buried in a book, and said, "Look at that guy, he's staring at a book while he walks instead of his phone!"

Instead of his phone.

It has become utterly commonplace and normal in our culture to see people staring at their phones whenever they have a spare moment in their *already* frantic lives.

(If this doesn't reflect *your* life, I'm guessing you recognize it in your children or grandchildren or siblings, etc.)

On the radio program, this phenomenon was largely analyzed as an impediment to personal well-being. We are too divided, too distracted, too busy to discover inner peace.

This is all very well and true.

But I think that there is another equally problematic implication of our cultural busyness and addiction to technology.

We don't notice each other anymore.

We don't have time for meaningful encounters with other human beings, including those who are not like us.

The poor, for example.

The lonely. The confused. The neglected. The conflicted. All around us there are people who need to be noticed, people who need a kind word, a helping hand, a dignifying encounter with another human being….

Even in modern, wealthy, 21st century Canada. We still have segments of our population that are easy and convenient to ignore.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Idle No More movements that have dominated headlines in Canada over the last few months and years are not perfect, but they remind us that there are still people on the margins, still people who are tired of being ignored, pushed to the side, stepped on.

This is only one example. The point is that we need to be people who pay attention.

We must never allow wealth or privilege or busyness or a sense of superiority and entitlement blind us to the human beings all around us that Jesus has called us to notice, to love.

We need to continue to implement the great reversal that has been advancing for two millennia.

We need to keep the world turned upside down, for Christ's sake.

As Jesus' parable reminds us, all of our lives depend upon it.

So may God help us to listen to Moses, to the prophets, to Jesus, the one who *did* rise from the dead.

Amen.