

The best stories are the ones that leave you wondering. That's one of the reasons that LOST is my favorite TV show of all time, because the ending answered some questions and left others open. The best stories don't wrap everything up in a bow but stay with you and cause you to come back to them again and again to say those two holy words, "I wonder." Jesus is at the end of a discourse that began back in Luke 15, where the religious leaders are upset with him because he dares to eat with sinners. Like a great standup comedian, he tells five stories in a row, one after the next and today we hear the closer.

The five-story set began with the lost sheep and the lost coin, which we looked at 3 weeks ago. We skipped third story of the lost sons, more commonly called the prodigal son. You may recall that I preached that story back in Lent, and 2 weeks ago we looked at the parable of the steward who changed his loyalty. Like any good standup routine, the closer is full of call backs, meant to jog our memory of the earlier bits in the routine, especially the parable of the lost sons. We cannot understand Lazarus and the rich man without hearing echoes of the prodigal son. Both parables are family stories between a father and disaffected sons, where one sibling refuses to have anything to do with the other. Come to think of it, that almost sounds like what the religious leaders are doing with Jesus. It's almost like that's the whole point of all five stories.

The parable of the prodigal son ends on a cliff hanger. After the younger son spends his inheritance on lavish living, he comes home to a father who welcomes him with open arms, but the elder son refuses to acknowledge his brother and won't join the party. We never find out what happens to the older brother. That's the cliff hanger. Now in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, Jesus gives us a hint about what happens to the who refuse to come join the party. The story begins: "There was a certain rich man who clothed himself in purple and fine linen, and who feasted luxuriously every day. At his gate lay a certain poor man named Lazarus who was covered with sores." We live in a time that glorifies the rich and the famous with an almost god-like worship of them. But in Jesus' day, the chasm between the rich and poor was unbridgeable, and poverty was crushing and dehumanizing. To begin a story about a rich man dressed in royal purple does not elicit fascination in the ears of Jesus' listeners. It elicits suspicion.

Now, the Old Testament is clear about how the Israelites are to treat the poor in their midst. They are to be unhesitatingly generous. **Deuteronomy 15** says:

"If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor...Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so." Deuteronomy 15:7, 10

Jesus didn't invent compassion and generosity for the poor. The wealthy in Israel always had an obligation under the law to give liberally to those in need. It wasn't an option, but a command. The rich man in Jesus' story didn't heed God's command. Outside his gate lay Lazarus, the only named character in all of Jesus' parables. Covered in sores, he longs to receive the crumbs from the rich man's table, but only the dogs would comfort him. Sometimes we treat our dogs better than we do our poor neighbors, yet in this story, it's the dogs who treat Lazarus better than his wealthy neighbor does. The name "Lazarus" means

God is my help, and perhaps Jesus gives him this name because in the absence of help from his neighbors, God was the only one who cared for him. How many people die in poverty and only God notices?

Lazarus dies and is carried to Abraham's side. The older translations say he went to Abraham's bosom. It's a way of saying that Lazarus was embraced by his father Abraham, just as the prodigal is embraced by his father, held by eternal love, forever free from suffering. The rich man dies, and he is tormented in the place of the dead. Jesus uses the word Hades, the Greek mythological term for the afterlife. Now it's important we remember we are in a parable, and parables are not literal. This is the only time in the entire New Testament that Jesus speaks about anything resembling what we have come to know as hell, and he does so in a parable. Why? Jesus is utilizing Greek mythology to make a point about what happens to us when we try and separate ourselves from sinners in this life. **Like all Jesus' teaching, he's inviting us to see the world differently right here and now.** He is not threatening us with a scary afterlife but inviting us to see how ungenerous living leaves us tormented and alone in this life.

So here we are—one man in torment, another at peace, and a third person, Father Abraham, who had many sons. Just like the story of the lost sons, this parable is about two sons, one who is embraced by the father's love and another son left outside. In this story, the rich man pleads with Abraham to send Lazarus to come help cool his tongue. Seems like a reasonable request. When we hear the rich man's plea and Abraham's indifference, the parable seems like revenge fantasy. But there's something else going on here. **Did you notice the rich man knows Lazarus' name?** He can't plead ignorance that he never knew who Lazarus was. He knew. He just didn't care enough to help. Now the rich man needs help, and what's his first instinct? To ask Lazarus to do for him what he himself never did—show compassion. He's still treating Lazarus as someone who should be at his beck and call. Even in Hades, he's barking out commands, expecting Lazarus to do his bidding. Do you see the problem yet?

Abraham refuses, not just once but three times. Why would Jesus have Abraham speak in this way? Jesus is the advocate of unlimited forgiveness and the golden rule. Why would Abraham be so callous to the rich man in this story? Notice that Abraham calls the rich man, "Child." Not evil one, or foolish man, but child:

"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. Besides 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."

Just like the father in the parable of the lost sons, Abraham recognizes his children. The man in Hades remains Abraham's son. That's not the issue. The issue is this uncrossable chasm. And why can't it be crossed? Because the rich man refuses to see that he is not only Abraham's son. He is also the Lazarus' brother. That's the point of the parable. Lazarus is his brother too, and the rich man's unwillingness to see this either on earth or in Hades has created an unbridgeable chasm.

The point of Jesus' closer is now clear. All five stories have been building to this single point. The religious leaders resent that Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them. They are like the older brother who refuses to celebrate the prodigal's return. They are like the rich man who cannot see Lazarus for who he is—a beloved child of God. The Big Family Table includes the poor and the addicted, the disposable and the shamed, conservatives and liberals, immigrants and asylum seekers, transgender and non-binary people, and all the colors on the spectrum, all of us as siblings, equals at God's table, all worthy, all belonging, all beloved. If we refuse to see that, we exclude ourselves so far from love that nothing can reach us. That's what's at stake when we fail to recognize our connections one to another. **It's not enough to recognize God as our father if we do not also recognize Lazarus our brother.** That's the point. Jesus isn't threatening us about the afterlife. He's inviting us to live here and now in the reality that we are all connected to each other, to live as though it's true.

Of course, the best stories don't wrap everything up in a bow but instead cause us to say, "I wonder." Abraham says no one can cross the chasm between separation and love, even if someone rises from the dead, but I wonder if he's wrong. Because there is one who has crossed the chasm between heaven and earth and left his Father's house and went into the far country to be with us, to live and die as one of us, to rise from the dead and bring us back to God's embrace. This one is forever inviting us to join the party with all our siblings. This one is Christ, and at Christ's table, we are all family.