

What Now?

Luke 16:19-31

Home Moravian Church, September 28, 2025

How would we hear this story differently if it started with Lazarus, and not the rich man?

Let's try it.

There was a poor man named Lazarus who sat on the street every day, in front of the same gate. He sat there because food was carried through that gate every day, to feed a rich man and his household. Every day, Lazarus hoped for food to fall from a cart or a sack. If it did, he hoped to snatch it up before it was gobbled by one of the nearby stray dogs, who were also hungry—so hungry that they licked his sores, hoping for nourishment. Lazarus never got enough food to keep him alive, and so one day, he died.

The rich man eventually died as well.

If we meet Lazarus first, does he make a bigger impression? Do we think about him longer, ask more questions? I did, when I wrote that paragraph. I found myself asking why Lazarus always sat in front of the same gate, and wondering what he was thinking as he sat there. Putting him first helped me enter into his experience.

But when Jesus told this story to the Pharisees, he began with the rich man. That gave him the opportunity to create a little surprise. It's kind of like what happens in the parable of the Good Samaritan—which, like today's story, is found only in the gospel of Luke.

Quick recap of the Good Samaritan story: A traveler is attacked and left for dead; two upstanding religious officials see the injured man and pass without helping. A third man stops and takes care of him. This third man is a Samaritan, and that's an important detail, because, thanks to a centuries-old religious dispute, Jesus' audience of Jews *despised* Samaritans. When

they heard Jesus say, “Along came a Samaritan,” they must have expected the worst of the worst; but Jesus turned their expectations upside down, making the despised Samaritan the hero of the story.

The Pharisees listening to today’s story could have identified at once with the rich man. We know this because the narrator, in verses just previous, has called the “lovers of money.” When they heard about the poor beggar, they likely expected the worst. They held him in contempt. They could have backed their opinion with verses in Deuteronomy, proclaiming that blessings from God are a reward for obedience; those who suffer must somehow have displeased God. Perhaps the Pharisees thought that was the way the story was going.

But if this was their expectation, how surprised they must have been when that poor beggar was carried away by angels to the arms of Father Abraham, while the rich man wound up in Hades, in torment. However, it should be no surprise for those familiar with the gospel of Luke, which insists, over and over, that in the kingdom of God, *the last shall be first*.

Does today’s story tell us the reversal happens in the afterlife? Stories like this one have been told all over the world.¹ Jesus, of course, offers a Jewish version, featuring the great patriarch Abraham; but some scholars think the basic story dates to ancient Egypt, whose tales describe regions of the dead and messages carried to the living. People of every culture tell stories of the afterlife, because stories are a way of approaching that great mystery. And isn’t it interesting that so many imaginative depictions of the afterlife wind up being stories of justice? In the world beyond, the people who suffered here are embraced, comforted, and celebrated, while the people who made them suffer are punished. Who doesn’t love a story about that reversal of fortune in the world beyond?

¹ See Fred Craddock, *Luke*, in the series *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville KY: John Knox, 1990), p. 195.

Jesus, too, describes a reversal in an afterlife story; but for him, it's just a continuation of that reversal theme. In Luke's gospel, Jesus preaches that the great reversal of fortune is already present. In chapter one—chapter one!—Mary sings that God “has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” The reversal was predicted by the prophet Isaiah, quoted in Luke's third chapter: “Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low.” The last shall be first in the kingdom of God—which, surprise! is not some faraway afterlife. In Luke 17, the Pharisees ask, “When is the kingdom of God coming?” Jesus answers: “The kingdom of God is among you.” The kingdom of God is like that mustard seed in chapter 13, which is pushing upward, not against the floor of heaven, but against the very soil on which you and I are standing. The kingdom of God is among us.

And yet: When I look around at the world today, I don't see much that looks like the kingdom of God. I don't see poor people becoming rich, or hungry people being filled. I see empty shelves at our Sunnyside Food Pantry, which because of decisions by people in power has less and less food available. I see the poor getting poorer and the middle class getting poorer and the rich getting so, so much richer. Why can't I see the kingdom of God, if it is, indeed, among us?

The Anglican bishop Nicholas Wright finds possibility in another translation. According to Bishop Wright, the Greek phrase in Luke 17:21, which the New Revised Standard translates as “the kingdom of God is among you,” seems idiomatically “to mean something a bit more active.” Rather than simply pointing to the presence of the kingdom, the phrase suggests something like, “*the kingdom of God is within your grasp*.” “In other words,” says Wright, “the ball is in your court.... The kingdom of God is a challenge for you now; it's something that God wants to bring about, but [God] wants your joining in with this. Your cooperation.”

In the assessment of Bishop Wright, we have a role in bringing in God's kingdom. The more we live as if already in the kingdom, the more we are in its midst. The more we notice the structures that do *not* look like God's kingdom—say, the elevation of the wealthy, the suffering of the poor—and work to change them, the more present the kingdom. As long as we are here, we have time to make a difference. As long as you and I are standing on this earth, we have a chance to help that seed push through the soil. Once we're gone, though... game over.

Standing with Lazarus, Father Abraham says to the rich man: "Between you and us a great chasm has been fixed." Nobody on the rich man's side can cross over to Abraham's side; and also—get this—"those who might want to pass from [Abraham's side] to [the rich man's side] cannot do so." No matter how kind and generous and forgiving Lazarus might be, he cannot come to the rich man's aid, because that great, fixed chasm cannot be crossed.

With the story of Lazarus and the rich man, is Jesus describing what we can expect in the afterlife, or is he telling us to get moving while we can still cross the chasms on earth today? Is he letting us know that at some point, our participation with the kingdom of God is no longer an option? When is it too late?

Death is a chasm that cannot be crossed; but what about chasms in the here and now? Are they "fixed"? If so, are we the ones who "fixed" them? If we, the living, have dug chasms into the soil of this earth, don't we have the power to close them while we are still here?

The point of Jesus' story is not to give us the details of the afterlife; the point of Jesus' story is to open our eyes to the life that's right in front of us. To *notice* what the earth looks like, and consider what we can do to make it look more like the kingdom of God.

Did the rich man ever even notice Lazarus sitting outside his gate? Do we? Because: Let's be honest about the side of the gate most of us are sitting on. Do we notice the people

sitting on the other side, or are they by now too far away? Has the distance between us grown into a chasm? If so, how do we cross it?

The chasms in our world, and in our nation, are growing wider. The chasm between the comfortable and the suffering. The unconscionable disparity between the richest and the poorest in our land. The enormous chasm between political parties bent on demonizing one another—historians could likely prove me wrong, but to me the division feels unprecedented, and even dangerous. The sides of the chasm drift farther and farther apart. One day, we might look across and realize that crossing is no longer possible. What then?

The question, I guess, is not “what then,” but “what now”?

What we need to do now, today, is notice the chasms, and consider how to cross them. The bridge is relationship. We need to create and sustain relationships with people unlike us, before we are just too far apart to cross over.

What we need to do now, today, is think about the stories we tell ourselves. Who do we put first in those stories? What if we try reversing the order, and put the last first? Would we pay more attention to their lives, ask more questions, enter into their experience? Once you’ve entered into someone else’s experience, you have begun to build a bridge across the chasm.

Common wisdom says: When you find yourself in a hole, stop digging. Maybe biblical wisdom says: When you and your neighbor find yourself on either side of a chasm, stop digging. Start building. Start crossing. It is not too late, not yet. It is not too late as long as we stand on this earth, feeling movement under our feet because a mustard seed is trying to push through the soil. God wants our joining in with this. Amen.