

## **A Different Ending**

Ps 146, Lk 16: 19-31

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### *Psalm 146*

Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD, O my soul!

I will praise the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God all my life long. Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help. When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish. Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free; the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous. The LORD watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. The LORD will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the LORD!

### *Lk 16: 19-31*

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He 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.’ But 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. 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.’ He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house— for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ He 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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Lazarus, covered with sores, living in agony, longing to satisfy his hunger with whatever scraps fell from the rich man’s table, was ignored, unseen, alone, not noticed, invisible. The rich man was comfortable and content, blind and deaf to the sadness and pain around him until it was too late. Then earthly comfort became his eternal suffering while Lazarus knew peace, health and joy. The chasm of invisibility separated them in life, the chasm of divine justice separated them in death.

Jesus’ parable appears to be succinct and clear as parables tend to be confusing and complicated, yet there is another message here for us that is hidden at first. The parable easily

reminds us of the barriers that exist between us and others less fortunate, how we can easily miss seeing who or what is right in front of us, how we can overlook what we would rather not see. But we also have to see that this is a parable, a prediction, but it is not a promise. The story does not have to end hopelessly. We have the ability to rewrite the ending. We have the power to write a different story. As Doc Brown noted in the Back to the Future trilogy, “Your future hasn’t been written yet. No one’s has. Your future is whatever you make of it. So make it a good one.”

The self-centered rich man knew enjoyment and abundance with only apathy to be offered to those in need of attention, affection and acknowledgement. He denied hope and then hope was denied him, hope for a drop of cool refreshing water, hope for his brothers who live as he did. The parable’s rich man could only lament and regret, yet thankfully that does not have to be the way for any of us. The one who overlooked what he did not want to see is not just a rich man in Luke’s gospel. The one who overlooked what he or she did not want to see is everyone of us at one time or another. Whether we are too busy or disinterested or unsure how to interact or feel awkward or any other rationale we have to dismiss and excuse what we do not want to see, we can be the rich man who denies the reality of the Lazarus at our gate.

I know Lazarus. Lazarus was one of my first hospice patients and she lived in the memory care neighborhood of a nursing home. In my first several weeks as a hospice chaplain I dreaded going to see her. I knew how to have conversations with those who were dying of cancer or cardiac conditions or respiratory illnesses, and I knew how to support their loved ones. I knew how to pray with them and for them. I knew how to have those tender, delicate conversations about their fears, their regrets, their mixed feelings, their final wishes, their greatest joys and their painful failures. I knew when to speak and when to keep silent, when to hold them in an embrace or when to just hold their hand. But my Lazarus made me nervous and left me feeling totally incompetent. In all of my seminary education and hospice orientation, I had only had the most minimal experience with Alzheimer’s Disease. I had no idea how to interact with her. I was awkward. My visits were brief, and I allowed myself to do that because I was busy and had other patients to see. That of course was an excuse but it worked for me. In reality, I did not know how to feed Lazarus even the simplest scraps that she needed. I didn’t know how to heal the sores of memory loss and the physical decline of her dementia. I did not know how to sit with her at the gate. I did not know how to offer her hope. I treated her as though she was invisible because I did not know what else to do.

But by God’s grace, this parable was not a hopeless promise. The ending was completely rewritten, and it was written by my Lazarus on a visit on the second day of Hanukkah.

Lazarus. Her name was Sarah, and there was very little known about her. She had lived in the nursing home for many years as her dementia progressed. She had a legal guardian but no family, no friends, no one to tell more of her story. There was one part of her story that was known though, and that was the 6 digit tattoo on her left arm from her time in a concentration camp in Germany.

When I arrived for the visit Sarah was curled up in a geri-chair, a specially padded wheelchair that supported her weakened trunk muscles. She was silent as she had months ago lost the ability to speak, and her eyes were open but glazed over, open but not seeing. On a desperate whim to find a way to support her as a hospice chaplain, I saw a Dollar Store plastic menorah high up on a shelf and placed it in Sarah’s hands. I wistfully hoped that she might in some small way react to the menorah, that there might be some long ago memory that could be reached.

Sarah clutched the menorah, and joyfully yelled out, “You found it, you found it you found it.”

In that moment Sarah did not hold the cheap plastic menorah that I had seen, but in her mind, beyond and before the ravages of Alzheimer’s disease, she held the menorah of her childhood. The hazy veil of dementia had been briefly broken by the power of a childhood memory, a time of a happy holiday family celebration.

Sarah taught me how to rewrite the story of incompetence and busyness and awkwardness. Sarah, Lazarus at the gate, living with the sores of memory loss, a very weakened body that had known so much agony and torment, and hungered for scraps of human companionship, rewrote the ending that would cross the chasm between her world and mine. Inspired by her joyful moment as she clutched her menorah, I was led to learn all that I could about Alzheimer’s disease and to educate hospice chaplains across the country about how to minister to, how to be fully present with, those who live in the shadow of their former selves, how to be hope, peace, comfort and acceptance rather than excuses for overlooking.

Sarah taught me, teaches us, the ageless truth of Anne Frank’s words which are true no matter where we are in life, whether we are the rich man or Lazarus, whether we are an unprepared chaplain or are living in the final weeks of an illness that robbed so much of we what have been and who we are, “Everyone has inside of him a piece of good news. The good news is that you don’t know how great you can be! How much you can love! What you can accomplish! And what your potential is!”

How great we can be is not dressed in purple and fine linen. How great we can be is not how sumptuous our feasting can be. How great we can be is how much we can love others as love allows us to see one another as we all really are- broken yet beautiful, hurting yet hopeful, vulnerable yet lovable. Amen.