

**The Rev. Dr. Jan C. Heller**  
**Proper 21, Year C, Luke 16:19-31, 29 September 2019**  
**Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA**

This past week Linda and I watched an intriguing movie, called “The Bookshop.” You may have seen it. Set in a small seaside village in England in the late 1950’s, it opens with a young widow gathering every resource she can muster to buy an old house in order to set up a bookshop in it. It had been a dream of hers since the death of her husband in the Second World War; they had first met in a bookshop. However, even before she completed the transaction to buy the property, a greedy and corrupt wealthy woman begins to scheme to take the bookshop away from her. Eventually, and with the complicity of cowardly villagers, this wealthy woman was successful in her efforts to completely destroy the dream and livelihood of the young widow. At the end of the movie, it is the courage of the young widow that is highlighted (and rightly so), but what struck us was the unremitting—and unredeemed—injustice of the whole situation, a situation that this widow was utterly powerless to change in any meaningful way. We were left yearning for justice, and we found the movie’s ending very unsatisfying.

The story in this morning’s gospel of the rich man and Lazarus is often viewed as a response to exactly this kind of yearning. It is a story where a wealthy person seemingly controls the destiny of a poor sick man, Lazarus, and has the power and the resources to aid him but, either through an evil intent or complete indifference, does nothing. Lazarus simply suffers, and does so for his entire life, until he dies and is finally comforted in the arms of Abraham. On the face of it, the message of the story seems to be, take heart, for those who suffer

undeservedly in this life with find relief and even a sort of justice (albeit, delayed justice) in the next. "...[R]emember," Abraham says to the rich man, "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."

The story of the rich man and Lazarus is, indeed, often read just as I have suggested, as a window into the afterlife where God finally delivers justice for the undeserved, life-long suffering of this poor, sick man and, presumably, others like him. However, scholars caution us against such a reading, both because of what it says theologically about God, who remains silent throughout the story, and because of the literary form of the story. This story, these scholars suggest, should be seen for what it was when Jesus used it, namely, not as window into heaven and hell, but as a folk tale—however, a folk tale with a twist at the end; indeed, with this twist, it is a folk tale that Jesus has transformed into a parable. These scholars suggest that, as a folk tale, someone would have been sent back from the dead to warn the rich man's five brothers, whereas, as a parable, Jesus changes the ending in a surprising and unexpected way.

We'll come back to this ending. But first, if in fact this story is correctly viewed as another parable of Jesus, then perhaps we should examine how Luke locates it in the context of other parables just before it and how it functions in his overall narrative about Jesus. Luke places Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus just after the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son (what we call the parable of the Prodigal Son). In these three parables, the shepherd, the woman, and, most significantly, the father signify God's overwhelming joy when they find and receive back that which was lost. Likewise, in our parable today, in welcoming Lazarus, Abraham is very much like the father

who is welcoming his lost son. However, all these parables taken together are about what Jesus was doing in his ministry then and there. His welcome of the poor and outcast, and even, in other passages in Luke, his welcome of those who were rich, is a sign that the kingdom of God was coming into being in the work and person of Jesus, and, as he gathers followers, that this should occasion much joy.

Ah, but that's not the end of today's parable, is it? There remains that enigmatic twist that Jesus tags onto the end, the twist that transforms a predictable folk tale into an unpredictable and surprising parable. As we heard, Jesus ends the parable with this intriguing dialogue between the rich man and Abraham: "...'father [Abraham], I beg you to send [Lazarus] 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.'" What might Jesus intend with such an ending? Could he be denying the persuasive power of his own, future resurrection?

Always remember that, however many ways we understand Jesus, he was primarily a prophet. And, as a prophet, he is saying "Yes, the kingdom of God is coming; yes, indeed, it is already present, and, yes, there is great joy in heaven over this." But—and this is a *big* but—he is also saying that the way into the kingdom is through *repentance*, both individual repentance and collective repentance; this is especially clear in the parable of the Prodigal Son, who came to himself and threw himself on the mercy of his father, but it's also clear in today's

parable. For Jews, to repent means to return from exile, to return from their alienation from God and God's covenant with them. It's not a surprise to hear this from a Jewish prophet. The surprise comes when Jesus says that even someone being resurrected from the dead will not convince some to repent. They will be lost, remaining alienated from God, and they won't even recognize it until it's too late.

If we step back for a moment from the story, perhaps we can better understand this strange claim if we distinguish between resurrection as *event* and resurrection as *metaphor*. Both are present in Luke and in the New Testament generally. Jesus is suggesting that the words he spoke and the deeds he did during his short earthly ministry can be viewed *metaphorically* as a foretaste of his future resurrection as an *event* and what, together, his ministry and death and resurrection would finally and firmly accomplish, namely, the inauguration of the kingdom of God, the beginning of a new age, and the start of a new world-encompassing family, a family that would include not only Jews but gentiles as well, just as God had originally promised to Abraham. So, in the end, Jesus, the prophet, is using this parable (and others like it) to call those around him to repentance and, more than that, he is saying that what they see and hear in him—welcoming of the poor and the outcast into the already-present kingdom of God—is about *how his resurrection is being brought forward*, about how the new age and the new family are already beginning. Finally, then, the parable today is saying, “If you won't be convinced to repent with what the prophets before me said, and you won't be convinced by I'm doing as a prophet *now*, then you won't be convinced when I'm raised from the dead, because what you see now is the kingdom of God already realized, already here, and you're missing it completely.”

These are more “hard words” from Jesus, and they are just as true for us today as they were for the Jews around him in his day. It is hard, as Jesus said elsewhere, for the rich to find their way to God, though, again, in Luke some do. But if they do, they only do so through repentance, through turning back from their exploitation and indifference. This applies to me, for compared to those around Jesus and many of those around me now, I am rich and privileged in many, many ways, ways that I often don’t even see since I take them for granted. It likely applies to most of us as individuals, as well, and it certainly applies to us as a congregation. I know we do much for the poor, but could we do more? Probably. And God help us, I hate to think what Jesus would say to us as a nation right now. I don’t want to over politicize this sermon, but there’s no doubt that Jesus was thinking politically as well as religiously when he tells this parable to the Jews around him. All of us need to repent; all of us need to find our way to God by loving not only God but also our neighbor. And who is our neighbor? That is for another sermon, but we already know how Jesus, the prophet, would answer this question. Amen.