Can’t Get Here From There

Luke 16:19-31

Preached FCCW, September 25, 2016

Some types of jokes never go out of style. “Pearly-Gate” jokes are a good example. You know, those jokes that begin with someone who has died being confronted by St. Peter at the Pearly Gates, where there is always some sort of test that the person must pass to gain admission to heaven. What makes these jokes funny is that, in the process of getting through the Pearly Gates into heaven the curtain of the person's life is drawn aside to expose an awkward truth about the person. A truth which was already obvious to everyone else. This revelation is usually followed by some comic karmic justice being dispensed.

Take this one for example:

Three health care professionals, having died, are lined up for entrance through the Pearly Gates into heaven, awaiting St. Peter’s “gate keeping” questions. "And what area of health care were you involved with?" he asks the first.

"I worked in a community health center in a poverty-stricken neighborhood," the man replied.

"Excellent," said St. Peter, "how self-giving. Please pass through to your heavenly reward."

"And you?" Peter asks the second.

"I spent most of life in nursing, caring for the needs of suffering patients in their hospital rooms."

"A noble calling, indeed," says Peter, "you're in!"

"What about you?" he asks the third.

"Me? Well, most of my health care career was spent administering an HMO."

St. Peter gets out his charts and some graphs and his pocket calculator. He plugs in his laptop and works the keyboard feverishly. After about a half-hour, he says to the man: "I've got some good news. You, too, are welcome into heaven ... for five days."

What makes this joke funny, is that the HMO administrator gets a taste of his own medicine in the afterlife, right?

The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus is, in its own way, a “Pearly Gate Joke.” And it works in the same way as that joke I just told.

In this parable a rich man dies and is buried. Jesus makes a point of mentioning that he was buried. I’m sure that his funeral was well attended.

Around the same time a poor beggar named Lazarus also dies. No mention of a burial for Lazarus, where folks could pay their respects. I doubt that anyone even noticed he was gone. Not that much respect was paid to Lazarus while he was alive.

The story says that every day he lay at the gate of the rich man. But the Greek word that is translated as “lay” actually has a more graphic meaning. It can mean to be tossed, thrown or cast. Lazarus lay at the gate to the rich man’s estate like a piece of litter tossed out of the window of a passing car. Like human refuse.

There he waited for scraps of bread from the rich man’s table to keep him alive. Scraps which never came.
Either because the rich man never even knew that Lazarus was there, or because he knew and didn’t care.
Well, like I said, both men die and go on to the afterlife. Upon his death, Lazarus gets the VIP treatment he never received on earth. He is carried by the angels directly to the presence of Abraham, the original Patriarch of the Jewish people. Lazarus who never got close to a banquet table in his life is seated at a feast with Abraham in the afterlife. It’s a totally unexpected rags to riches story, because conventional wisdom said that if you were poor it was because you were getting what you deserved. And if you were wealthy, it was God’s way of rewarding you.
As we know, somebody always gets the bad news in these Pearly Gate jokes, right? And the rich man’s bad news comes when he wakes up to discover that he is now the beggar and that there is a vast gulf separating him from Abraham, from Lazarus, and from any hope of comfort.
Neglected by others in life, Lazarus is now seen to be prized by God.
Surrounded by people who fawned over him on earth, the rich man now sees how utterly alone his choices in life have left him.
But this parable is not really about rewards and punishments in the next life. Jokes about people at the Pearly Gates aren’t funny because of what they tell us about the afterlife. Their humor lies is in how they use that moment of judgment at the Pearly Gates, to expose something that is not as it should be in this life.
The heart of the gospel is that eternal life is not won or lost by how many good deeds we have done or by how many black marks there are against us when we face a moment of judgment. The Christian belief is that eternal life is a gift that has been secured for us by Jesus.
His sacrifice for us wipes all slates clean.
But the gospel also tells us that the gates to eternity that Jesus opened for us should alter the ways we conduct ourselves in this life.
It isn’t a question of whether we can get there from here; that’s already been settled by God’s mercy.
The question is whether God’s justice can get here from there.
Jesus once said that the most important commandment of all came in two parts.
We are to love God with all our being. And we are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.
This parable reasserts that there is a correlation between the distance we place between us and our fellow-man, and the distance that creates -- in our relationship to God.
This story of two men separated from each other after death is really about two men who already lived in two different worlds when they were living.
The worlds intersected at a rich man's gate where a sick beggar was laid.
One world is the world of fine food and drink where every day was a banquet and the master of the mansion dressed only in the best of clothing.
The other world is one of sickness and hunger.
For the rich man there is an abundance of material things.
For the poor man there is an abundance of misery and want.
Which is to say, the picture Jesus paints in this story is an accurate description of our world, too.
There is an ever widening chasm between the rich and the poor in our world today, where people die from lack of food, clean water or simple medicines.
The gap exists not just between the developed and undeveloped nations of the world. It exists within our own borders.
When Jesus told this parable it was a declaration that this gap between rich and poor is as much a
spiritual crisis for the wealthy, as it is a health crisis for the poor. It isn’t the comforts we enjoy, in themselves that God opposes but the way that one’s comforts can isolate them from the needs of others, and keep us from acting to ease their burdens. As it says in the passage from 1 Timothy: The love of money -- not money itself, but the love of money -- is the root of all kinds of evil. Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “People loved the things they could get for themselves, better than the way they loved the things God wanted to give them. They were satisfied with linen suits and sumptuous feasts -- when God wanted to give them the kingdom. They were content to live in a world with beggars, when God wanted to give them brothers and sisters. They were happy to get by with the parts of the Bible that backed up their own ways of life, when God wanted to give them a new life altogether.” There’s a saying that I’m sure you are all familiar with. Sometimes I’ve heard the Bible given as its source, though no such saying actually exists in the Bible. The saying is, “God helps those who help themselves.” It’s a generalization that has been used at times as a justification for ignoring the complex causes of poverty, or of evading responsibility for being part of any solution to the problem. Do you know that of all the parables of Jesus that have come down to us, this is the only one that has a character with a name. That honor falls not to the rich man, but to the beggar, Lazarus. The name Lazarus means “God helps.” Not only is the saying “God helps those who help themselves” not in the Bible, in this parable Jesus says exactly the opposite. Lazarus is wretchedly poor and can’t do anything to help himself. He is completely at the mercy of others’ generosity and kindness. Yet, Jesus identifies him by name as the person that God helps. God has chosen to rely on God’s people -- people like you and me -- to be the avenue by which the Lazarus’ of the world are helped. There is a connection between not wanting to see the human face of poverty -- and not wanting to hear the voice of God calling us to do something about it. Shut one door and you shut the other. And before you know it, there is a great divide. Not only between us and the people whose needs we turn away from. But between us and God. In a last ditch plea to bridge that divide, the rich man in the parable begs Abraham to send Lazarus back to the world of the living so that his brothers can be warned and avoid following his errors. Abraham simply replies, “If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.” You and I have the words of Moses and the prophets in our Bibles calling us to open our gates to the poor. We also have the example of someone who actually did rise from the dead – Jesus. Jesus didn’t avoid the poor. He fed them and healed them, and then he died for them. To them who hunger for the scraps to fall from another’s table, he offers the Bread of Life. There is an old story about a man who was overwhelmed by all the suffering he saw in the world. When he dies and gets to heaven, he cries out to God: “Why don’t you do something about all that poverty and violence?” God answers him, “I did. I created you.” Karl Barth, who was probably the most influential theologian of the 20th century, once said that “Christians should pray with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.”
The newspaper signifies our need to face squarely the world as it is.
The Bible supplies our vision of a world as God intends it.
Between the two, you and I are called to bridge the gaps and open the gates that stand in the way of God’s justice getting here from there.