

Year C, Pentecost 20
September 29th, 2013
Luke 16:19-31

Abraham's Bosom

Today's sermon calls for some warm-up stories:

Three nurses appeared before St. Peter at the pearly gates. St. Peter said to the first, "Tell me what you did on earth."

The first said, "I was a birthing room nurse. I helped bring hundreds of precious babies into the world."

"Enter!" said St. Peter. Then he turned to the second. "And how about you?" he asked.

She replied, "I was a trauma unit nurse. I helped save hundreds of lives of people involved in terrible accidents."

"Enter!" cried St. Peter, and turned to the third.

"I worked for an HMO," she admitted. "Over the years I saved my company hundreds of thousands of dollars by refusing extended care to people who were trying to bilk the system."

"You may enter!" said St. Peter.

"You really mean it?" asked the nurse incredulously.

"Yes," replied St. Peter. "You've been pre-approved for three days."

A young couple was killed in an accident on the day before their wedding. When they arrived at the Pearly Gates, St. Peter asked if there was anything he could do to make being in heaven even more pleasant. So they explained about dying the day before their wedding and asked if it was possible to be married in heaven. "No problem," said St. Peter, "leave it with me."

A hundred years or so later they met St. Peter and asked about the wedding. "Everything is being arranged," he assured them.

Another hundred years passed, and they met St. Peter again. They reminded him about the wedding and said, "We know that in heaven, time is of no consequence, but we have been waiting over two hundred years." St. Peter replied, "I am sorry. All the

arrangements were made the day after you arrived and there is only one thing preventing us from having the wedding..... We're waiting on a minister!"

In our gospel text today Jesus is telling a "St. Peter and the pearly gates" kind of story. He begins his story by setting up a powerful contrast between a very rich man who can afford the best clothes and has a house so big that it has a gate and a very poor man, in terrible health, and so weak he can't chase the licking dogs away. The poor man lies on the ground outside the rich man's gate and Jesus says the poor man's name is Lazarus. He doesn't give the rich man a name. Let's see where Jesus is going.

"In due course the poor man died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom." I picture Lazarus being flown up on angel's wings and deposited inside Abraham's robe where he looks out at the world, safe and secure, like a two year old in his father's arms. "The rich man also died, and was buried." Notice the poor man gets carried by the angels and the rich man gets buried. Ah, we love it. We have always been envious of the rich but now revenge comes and the tables have turned. Now the poor man is close to God and the rich man is six feet under. But it doesn't end here and gets more graphic.

"As he (the rich man) is being tormented in Hades, he looks up and sees Abraham far away, and Lazarus in his bosom." Does a picture form in your imagination? Can you sense the distance? "Father Abraham! He calls out. 'Have pity on me! Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue! I'm in agony in this fire!" With exclamation marks after every phrase he is saying, "I'm in Hell here, get me out."

Notice how the rich man goes to the top, to "Father Abraham." He feels entitled; he makes a direct appeal. Just as it was on earth so now he literally goes over Lazarus' head and speaks directly to Abraham. He wants a moment of relief from the hell he finds himself in and he wants Lazarus to deliver it.

Has the rich man repented from the days in which he ignored Lazarus? Does he see Lazarus any more clearly now? Well, maybe a little, now he acknowledges his existence. And he appears to know his name since he wants Abraham to send him. But he still sees him as an inferior, as in the servant's position, a lesser soul—not someone with whom you could connect.

Abraham's response is very tender and kind. He holds no malice toward the rich man but must regretfully apprise him of the realities and there are two. "'My child,' replied Abraham, 'remember that in your life you received good things, and in the same way Lazarus received evil. Now he is comforted here, and you are tormented.'"

This is stated as an unquestionable fact, something so obvious it is not worth discussing. But this was not obvious at all. In fact, almost everyone thought the rich man was rich because God had blessed him and Lazarus was poor and afflicted because he was evil. Poverty and affliction

are not caused by human greed and selfishness, by economic systems that are distorted so as to benefit some and make it nearly impossible for others. No, it is a moral thing and Lazarus is where he is because he or his parents are immoral. Do you see how the story presents a huge challenge to their thinking?

Being in the bosom of Abraham is the last place they would expect to find Lazarus. Common belief expects he will be in the fire and his earthly afflictions are but justified foretastes of what he's got coming.

And then Abraham reveals one more thing. "Besides that, there is a great chasm standing between us. People who want to cross over from here to you can't do so, nor can anyone get across from the far side to us." I am using NT Wrights translation here and I wonder how a chasm stands? I picture this empty, hollow shaft that goes down forever. It is not a wall; it's a vacuum, and things fall through it endlessly. It's like a black hole or a dark well where sound goes down but no echo returns.

How does that make you feel? Do you feel lonely and desolate? We were not made to be lonely like that. We need to be connected, in relationship, and not cut-off from Abraham, Lazarus or the other; whether it is the little "o" or the big "O" other.

Why do you think Jesus is telling this story this way? Has the rich man dressed in purple and fine linen who feasts sumptuously everyday cut himself off from life? Is his need to be exclusive excluding him from those sources of life that could give him vitality? When he ignored the poor man at his gate, whose name we now discover he does know, the sick man with his sores, the man the dogs comforted with their licking but he refused to acknowledge; did he sever his connection to his own humanness?

If you find this a bit convicting as I do, you will understand our rich brother's next request. "Please, then, Father," he said, "send him to my father's house. I've got five brothers. Let him tell them about it, so that they don't come into this torture-chamber." In turns our brother, the rich man, does have room in his heart for love. He loves his brothers and he does not want them to end up where he is. So it isn't that he can't love, he can. It is the restriction he puts on whom he loves that creates the problem. He must have been following a theology that led him astray. He hadn't been told God's love includes everyone, even those the rich man thought God was punishing. Wanting to give his brothers a chance to repent, to think differently, he asks Abraham to send Lazarus to his brothers with the truth before this happens to them!

Now remember this is a real tricky story. It sounds like Jesus is saying that if we aren't inclusive and help people in trouble we will go to hell. But he doesn't believe God is like that so he takes this story that sounds like it's about being sent to hell and subverts it from within. He manages to turn everything upside down and suggest that scapegoating and exclusion are the things that destroy life, for life is about connectedness and caring and hell is something we create for ourselves when we cut ourselves off particularly from humans in need.

Back to our story--Abraham turns down the rich man's request for a special visitation to his brothers saying, "they've got Moses and the prophets, Let them listen to them." Apparently Abraham thinks the rich history of God's relationship to his people is sufficient to see God's character but the rich man disagrees. "No, Father Abraham," he replied, "but if someone went to them from the dead, they would repent!"

What do you think? If someone was resurrected from the dead and went to the five brothers of this world would they repent? Would they decide to see God differently? Abraham says, "If they don't listen to Moses and the prophets, neither would they be convinced, even if someone rose from the dead." Is that true? Does Jesus know something his audience doesn't know? Will we humans change our ways and think differently or are we bound for isolation and endless self-inflicted torment?