

The story of the rich man and poor Lazarus is a powerful and disturbing story. Curiously, the bulk of the narrative occurs *after* they both die. After a life time of suffering poor Lazarus dies, and is *finally* consoled. While the rich man, who enjoyed much in his life, but turned away from the needs of Lazarus at his gate, when he dies, he is condemned to suffer great torment. The torment is so great that he cries out for mercy. But his cries for deliverance cannot be fulfilled, so he turns his cry to ask on behalf of his five brothers, that they may be spared from such torment. That cry too is left unfulfilled.

On one level this is a story that clearly illustrates the importance of how the “haves” treat the “have nots”. How for those who have been given much, much is required. How those who dress in purple and fine linen and feast sumptuously every day are able to see and respond to the needs of those who lie at their gates longing to satisfy their hunger. If we are honest,



all of us here have our needs met. We are clothed, fed, educated, and have access to health care. But there are many in this world who do not have this privilege.

The story is part of an ongoing reminder in the gospels to look out for the most vulnerable, to hear their cries, and, out of the abundance of our riches, respond to them. For to those who have much, much is required. It is a moral obligation.

The story is also operating a much larger scale beyond our personal moral obligation.

It is helpful to be reminded of the parable of the good samaritan. In that story Jesus is asked, “Who is my neighbour?” But by the end of the story Jesus turns the question around to ask “Which one of these three *was* a neighbour?”

The lawyer answers, “The one who showed mercy.” “You have answered correctly,” Jesus says, “go and do likewise.”

The call to show mercy is a recurring theme throughout the gospels. It begins with “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.”

From the man who was beaten up while travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho and left to die in a ditch; to the younger brother who squandered his father’s money and was left to die in a foreign country with

nothing. From the ten lepers who were cast out of the city; to the crippled woman who was bent over for 18 years. From the dishonest manager who was about to lose his job; to the leader of the synagogue whose daughter was dying. All of these people, and countless more, are asking for mercy. They are the last, their resources are spent, and yet in the kingdom of God, in the presence of God, they end up becoming the first.

In today's story, for those who don't show mercy, Abraham says "a great chasm has been fixed." When the rich man pleads on behalf of his five brothers, Abraham replies that they have Moses and the prophets. But, the rich man asks, if someone were to rise from the dead, *then* they will repent. "Oh," Abraham responds, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone rises from the dead."

This is precisely what will happen in the larger gospel narrative. Jesus, the one who willingly surrenders all to become the last, the least and the lost, giving himself over to be condemned to suffering and death; the one who from the cross cries, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do" and, and the one who descends to the place of torment, complete absence from God, in utter darkness, in hell, is the one who accomplishes the impossible. Jesus actually crosses over the great chasm, and rises from the dead. And

when he rises from the dead, he brings up with him all those who had died; all those who were condemned; all those who were the last and the lost. And there is much rejoicing in heaven. But we know what happens, no one believes Mary's testimony, "I have seen the Lord." No one.

But in this unique and powerful act Jesus becomes poor Lazarus, condemned in this life; and Jesus becomes the rich man, condemned in the life to come, and he brings deliverance and comfort for all. As we all seek mercy this then becomes a good news story of our deliverance.

Jesus asks the lawyer, "What is written in the law, what do you read there?"
"Love God and love your neighbour."
"You have answered correctly, do this and you will live."

The orientation of the gospel, fashioned after the incarnation and the life of the Trinity, is always to call us out of ourselves; to cast our gaze on the other and to offer mercy. It is always a call to lose our life that we might find life. It is always a call to place our faith in Jesus. This, as Paul says to Timothy, "is the treasure of a good foundation, where we can take hold of the life that really is life."