

Neither Lazarus nor the rich man is given any personal qualities besides their material well-being. Lazarus is not described as virtuous, and the rich man is not described as especially villainous or impious. What you need to know about them, apparently, is that the rich man was extravagantly wealthy and high-living, and Lazarus was so poor and sick that he could not even sit up or beg, but only lay at the rich man's gate. Especially because this is Luke's gospel, material circumstances are critical. Poverty is *material*, not spiritual, and it matters.

When they die, they go to the land of the dead, and apparently in the land of the dead there's a good place and a bad place, and they're separated by a chasm, but you can still see each other and talk to each other. Thus the rich man, in torment but still possessed of remarkable chutzpah, can see Lazarus and think to himself, "There's a poor person; I can get him to do something for me." "Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue." He makes this remarkable request to their mutual ancestor, Abraham, and Abraham says, ". . . 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.*" Isn't that interesting? The designers of the land of the dead apparently had to modify it so that people in the good part couldn't go over and visit and maybe help the people in the bad part. Because maybe that was happening too much.

I know that's not the point of the parable, but I think it's important. The rich man during his lifetime had this guy lying at his gate and even knew his name, but he did not talk to him, let alone give him crumbs or whole pieces of bread. Now he wants help from Lazarus, and apparently there's a danger that Lazarus would oblige.

I've sung the praises of the TV series "The Good Place" before, and I feel like it's been out (and finished) long enough that I'm not spoiling it by revealing that in the first season, the

characters who've gone to the good place after death find out that in fact, they're in the bad place. The demons who are in charge of tormenting unredeemed souls have figured out that the most exquisite torture isn't having your liver eaten by wolves or being frozen into a lake of ice, but being forced to interact with other people who frustrate and bewilder you. Tahani, an outgoing socialite, has been told that her soulmate is a Buddhist monk who's taken a vow of silence. Jason, a small-time criminal, thinks that his only chance of staying in the good place is to continue playing the part of the Buddhist monk, since obviously it's a mistake for him to be there. Eleanor has also figured out that she doesn't really belong in the Good Place, and she has appealed for help to Chidi who, in life, was a professor of ethics and both knows that it is wrong to perpetuate a deception *and* that Eleanor needs his cooperation to keep her from the torments of hell. They blunder around, compounding bad consequences of their pretensions and deceptions until in the last episode of the first season, Eleanor gets it. This **is** the Bad Place. They are each other's torment.

But in the second season the characters discover another truth, something that the demons had not anticipated. Over time, as they live through difficulties together and try to solve problems together, they become bonded. They become family to one another. And they even begin to become better people. Trying to be admitted to the real Good Place, they help each other become more compassionate, less selfish, braver, more clear-eyed. Even though the demons erase their memories and make them start over time and again, they always end up bonding with one another and becoming better people.

Very poor people are notorious for their failure to save. The experience of deprivation is so real and so constant that they are often quick to share the little that they have with

another person in need. And I use the word “notorious” advisedly, because there really is a glass ceiling effect sometimes such that people keep giving away what they have and never accumulate enough to “get ahead,” to save enough for a down payment of rent or a reserve in case of emergency. It’s both noble and frustrating, at least for me, because I want people to beat the odds in this cold and unforgiving society, but I see why they feel obligated to keep sharing with those who are worse off.

Lazarus could have been one of those destitute sharers. If the chasm had not been put in place, he might have gone over to the rich man with more than a wet finger—with maybe a whole jar of water. He might have visited every day, and begun to plot with him an escape from the Bad Place. Having never passed a word between them in life, Lazarus and the rich man might in death have established a relationship, even a friendship, and subverted the justice of the afterlife by getting the rich man undeserved admittance to the bosom of Abraham.

I say this not only on the authority of having watched all four seasons of “The Good Place,” but also because relationship seems to be the linchpin of Jesus’ own parable. The rich man failed to look at or acknowledge Lazarus during their lives—he never met his eyes. When his request for water is turned down, he asks Abraham to send Lazarus to his brothers, to warn them before it’s too late. Nope, says Abraham, they have the Law and the Prophets; they know what they should do. But, presses the rich man, if a *person* goes to them from the dead, they will repent. And I think he’s saying, not that the miraculous nature of the dead rising would convince them, but that a *person speaking to them* would make the critical difference. The doorway to transformation is relationship. Having the weight of a relationship that makes you

feel obligated is more compelling than knowing the Law and the Prophets.

I should acknowledge that in the parable, the rich man never does repent. He keeps trying to send Lazarus hither and yon, totally failing to learn from the fact that he was condemned for the way he lived his life. He *does* deserve eternal torment because he's not getting any better. But in my imagined alternative, having to interact with Lazarus and get to know him as a three-dimensional person would be the beginning of his redemption.

Clearly the message of this parable is, "Don't be like the rich man." And Luke seems to feel that he's dealing with adults, and once they've heard the message they have what they need. In fact, Luke's gospel is oriented toward non-Jews who *didn't used to* have the Law and the Prophets, but in Luke's view, now through Jesus they do, so unless there are any questions they should just go on out and live the gospel. Maybe it doesn't have to be any more complicated than that. But in an age when we have lots of information and we know about the scope of human suffering in the world, we can become overwhelmed. I used an online instrument at www.givingwhatwecan.org to find out how rich I am, and learned that I am in the richest 1.3% of the world's population. Yet as advantaged as we are, and as well-informed of the need that we are, we also have to work against the tendency to go numb in the face of big numbers and suffering that is never abated. Remembering that within those big numbers are faces and stories is how we avoid becoming the rich man. Interacting with others who are different is how we avoid becoming the rich man. And recognizing that we need one another's mercy is how we avoid the chasm that separates the human family.

Divine Word,

You sent Moses to speak law to the people and bring order to chaos. You sent prophets to speak repentance and bring hope to the hopeless. You sent your son, Jesus, to become your living

Word. Open our ears to hear your word, and our hearts to reflect the light of your truth to others, for the sake of the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. Amen.