

Time and Place for Invisibles

Luke 6:20-26; James 1:27-2:9

The story Jesus told about the rich man and Lazarus is from Luke's gospel, a gospel which I think pays special notice to underdogs and outsiders. Women are noticed in Luke's gospel as both disciples and financial sponsors in Jesus' entourage. Luke's gospel alone tells the story of a Good Samaritan and a Prodigal Son, both doing well and ending well. Matthew's gospel contains the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus teaches that God blesses *"the poor in spirit"*. Luke's gospel contains a sermon in a meadow, a *"level place"*, in which Jesus teaches that God blesses those who are simply *"poor"*.

Which could lead to some degree of confusion I think. The story of the Rich Man and Lazarus in Luke 16 lands the rich man *"in Hades"* after he dies. In Jesus' day, people thought of Hades as sort of the vestibule to hell. So Jesus depicts this rich man as writhing in the flames, and through the smoke and the shimmering air the rich man can see Abraham, far off, waiting for the resurrection with all those people who will go to heaven when Jesus returns. And right beside Abraham is Lazarus, the street person who died on the sidewalk because the rich man never had the time of day for him.

And it's confusing because you might think that the rich man's cruel neglect of Lazarus was the sin that cost the rich man his soul. And you might think that being poor was what saved Lazarus that being a street person, or being prodigal, or a woman or a Samaritan, or some other kind of underdog is what motivates God to save them or excuse their sins just because they were dealt a bad hand in life.

But a careful reading of Luke 16 will teach us that it is not wealth or poverty, gender or ethnicity, being dealt a good hand or a bad hand in life that is the critical factor in what becomes of our souls. To be sure, the rich man's neglect of the man who lay on his sidewalk involved a sort of evil that God will not excuse. So Jesus pictures the rich man in Hades, waiting for a resurrection to hell.

But when the rich man begged Abraham to send Lazarus back from dead to warn his five equally rich, equally selfish brothers of what awaited them, Abraham refused. *"They have Moses and the prophets,"* Abraham said, *"let them hear Moses and the prophets."* The rich man's response was interesting. *"No!"* He said, *"But if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!"* And it's here that Jesus places the punch line of the parable on Abraham lips: *"If they don't hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone rises from the dead."*

And the point Jesus is making is that God gave us a Law, God gave us prophets and commandments to orient our hearts so that we can see things, so that if we should ever be confronted by Someone risen from the dead, it is the law, God's commandments that will teach

us what that means. Jesus' point is that, if you're so blind and self involved that you don't notice a man starving to death on your sidewalk, you're not going to see a risen Savior even if God shows you one.

And the very same confusion leading to the very same principle is at work in our passage from James' letter this morning. James writes, "*Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.*" And at first glance you might think that practicing enough charity or reaching some level of moral rectitude is your ticket for never passing through Hades on your way to hell.

But in fact James has a different lesson in mind, and like his older brother, James tells us a story. He opens with the moral of the story. "*My brothers and sisters, show no favoritism as you hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.*" In other words, a genuine faith in Jesus will lead us to see people objectively, fairly. Now comes James' story, "*...if a man comes into your assembly wearing a golden ring and fine clothes, and a poor man comes in wearing shabby clothes, and if you dote on the man in fine clothing and say, 'You sit here in a good place,' while you say to the poor man, 'You stand there,' or 'Sit here there at my feet,' have you not sown doubt among yourselves and become judges with evil motives.*"

Now, those of you who are paying attention will notice that I've translated the closing point of James' story in verse 4 differently than your blue Bibles. They have James accusing his readers of judging one another, making distinctions, favoring one person and not another. Which is certainly the problem. But the verb James uses here doesn't mean that in the middle or passive voice. In the middle and passive voice, this verb means to doubt. It appears twice in James' first chapter and both times it is translated as talking about doubt. But here your Bibles translate it differently over and against the rules of Greek grammar, just to make James' logic more tidy to the modern mind.

I'm going to argue that James didn't need their help. What he is saying here is that, when we favor a certain sort of person because of what they have or who they are in the world, we undermine the heart attitude that both Moses and Jesus taught we should hold for one another as brothers and sisters and neighbors. To be dazzled by someone's appearance or success or strength or smarts, or to be blind to the strength and character that a poorer person, from humbler origins brings to the table is to doubt God's word, to doubt what Moses' commandments and Jesus' gospel taught about how his people should be organized both in Old Testament Israel and today in the Church.

The point here is that being a Christian involves more than just wandering down the sawdust trail and saying the sinner's prayer and giving our lives to Christ. That's a necessary start. But belonging to Jesus leads to a whole complex of relationships by which God's kingdom will be built and governed in a fallen world where all of us together are untangling from sin and folly and wickedness and cruelty. And the point is that none of us can follow or lead in God's

kingdom by ourselves. Moses said as much in the first chapter of Deuteronomy, his farewell message to God's people.

Near the end of his life, Moses remembered the moment he realized he needed help, *"At that time I said to you, the people, 'I am not able to bear you by myself...Choose for your tribes wise, understanding, and experienced men, and I will appoint them as your heads...And I charged your judges at that time, 'Hear the cases between your brothers and judge righteously between a man and his brother or the alien who is with you. You shall not show favoritism in judgment. You shall hear the small and the great alike..."*

Four hundred years later, Solomon would teach something similar in Proverbs, he wrote, *"A righteous man understands the rights of the poor, but the wicked have no such understanding."* A thousand years after Solomon in the gospels, a scribe would ask Jesus what was the most important commandment. You know Jesus' answer, *"You shall love the Lord your God...heart...soul...mind...and strength. But Jesus went on,"And the second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'*

People think that second commandment was one of the Ten, but Moses originally taught it in Leviticus 19. Listen to the context, Moses taught, *"You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not show favoritism for the poor, nor should you defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbor...You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your brother, lest you incur sin because of him... You shall not take vengeance against your brother or bear a grudge against your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself..."*

So what Moses was laying out, what Jesus declared the most important commandment after loving God, is a sort of objectivity that requires us to see and deal with one another as God's people, in light of what God's word says about us, namely, that we all belong to God, that we're all in the process of being redeemed, that we've all got problems and we all, rich or poor, have potential above and beyond what the world will ever see. And what James is teaching here is that, when we deal with each other become based on worldly appearances or accomplishments, we cast doubt on what it means to be God's people, because the Law and the Gospel both teach otherwise.

So James concludes today's passage like Jesus, his brother, had, returning to Moses and the commandments. He writes, *"If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing well. But if you show favoritism, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors."* The point being that what landed the rich man from Jesus' story in Hades was not, first of all, a lack of charity. He might have given to all sorts of charities. Most rich people do. What landed him in Hades was blindness, and deafness first to the word of God, and then to the person God put right on his doorstep.

There is nothing inherently unrighteous about being rich, but there is a danger in it. And the danger is that worldly success can fill us with a false confidence that tempts us to think we don't need to listen to what Moses and Jesus and the word of God actually says. When we're successful, it becomes easy to imagine that we're fine the way we are. When in fact, the commandments were given to bring us to our knees before a holy God who we can never satisfy without the forgiveness and help that only a Savior can provide. The poor are blessed, Jesus taught, because their circumstances get them halfway to their knees before they ever hear a commandment.

People on the wrong side of the tracks go hungry, they cry tears, they aren't surrounded by people telling them how smart and strong and good they are. They have less to distract them from how far the commandments are beyond their reach. And so when they hear of a Savior, they have less to lose when they set their lives to learn and know and love him. So poverty can be and often is a blessing. Often a humble start will keep a person out of Hades and headed toward Abraham.

Not always, but often. So James on his way to the second commandment, what he called "*the royal law*", took a detour to remind his readers and us of what Jesus taught about the rich in the gospels, that it is "*difficult*" for "*a rich person*" to "*enter the kingdom of heaven*". There were rich and prominent people in old Israel who threw in with Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus to name two.

But it wasn't easy. John's gospel records that Nicodemus gulped more than a few times before coming out for Jesus. And it wasn't common. Beginning in Galilee, continuing in Jerusalem, and right out to the edges of the Mediterranean rim, Christian disciples were thought of as an anti-social, irrational, fanciful riff-raff from the fringes of respectable society. This fact, often mentioned in the New Testament, must have contributed to their exaggerated concern to gain disciples from the right side of the tracks. But James reminds them that, the very respectability they craved was what motivated wealthy and powerful people to oppress and persecute them.

Because bowing to the commandments will never be generally fashionable to people who have the wherewithal to get their own way. Putting God's kingdom first, giving something more to the poor than a throwaway gift, seeing them, meeting them, loving them, will never be easy for people with a busy life and a lot to lose. These facts do not prevent rich and powerful people from finding and knowing and loving Christ. Many do, and their wealth and abilities become part of what makes the kingdom go. But the tide of human nature works the other way. It is the poor, the hungry, the sad and the rejected who know they need help and light up at the sight and sound of a Savior.

If we believe the commandments, and fear God's holiness, and want God's forgiveness, we should never forget that we belong to a kingdom where the last will be first and least will be greatest.