

Poetic Justice

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Sunday, September 30, 2007; Bryn Mawr, PA
Luke 16:19-31*

“Child, remember that during your lifetime you received good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now his is comforted here, and you are in agony.”

Movement 1 – If I Ever Get to Heaven

The first song in the musical *Jesus Christ Superstar* includes the lyrics, “Listen, Jesus, to the warning I give. Please remember that I want us to live. But it’s sad to see our chances weakening with every hour. All your followers are blind. Too much heaven on their minds. It was beautiful, but now it’s sour.” In this song, Judas is complaining that the other disciples are blindly following Jesus because they are assuming that he is going to assure them a place in the Kingdom, a place in heaven. When they are with Christ, they know where they are going.

Where are you going? After all of this, where are you going? I don’t mean after church is over. I don’t mean for your next vacation, after you retire, or when you leave for college. I mean, after life, after this great journey is through, where are you going? Is heaven on your mind?

Have you ever found yourself wondering such things? Have you ever found yourself lying in bed and wondering, what’s next? Have you ever found yourself taking stock of your life and wondering where you might be going after this? Where are you going? In evangelical Christian terms, we would phrase the question by way of heaven or hell. We would ask if you are going to heaven or if you are going to hell. Go door to door and this is the question you will ask, “are you going to heaven or hell?” Where are you going?

I would imagine that at one time or another you thought about heaven. For some it is constantly on the mind. For some it is a constant worry and wonder. Maybe some of you are sure of your final destination. Maybe some of you do not have any doubt at all in your mind, but maybe some others of you wonder. You sing the campy song, “You’ll never get to heaven on roller skates....” and you throw out all of your roller skates to be safe. You aren’t sure and wonder.

Maybe you hear other religions, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism talking about their “hereafter” and you wonder if you really know where you are going. You wonder if your idea of heaven is the same as the Nirvana that Buddhists strive to attain, or as the Hindus suggest, that moment when your self is at one, ultimately indistinct from Brahman, the supreme spirit. You hear about these different ends and wonder, where am I going. Heaven is on your mind. Or maybe, one afternoon, while walking down the street with your thoughts lost elsewhere you find a truck shoved in your face and someone asking, do you know where you are going, and you find that you can’t give an answer. Heaven is on your mind.

Where are you going? This was a question that was on the mind of the Jews as they were walking with, following, and listening to Jesus. They wondered about the hereafter, about the eternal life with Abraham, or the eternal life in torment. Influenced by the cosmology of the Greeks and then the Romans they found themselves wondering if they were going to Hades or to Heaven and how much control they had over their

placement. They were wondering if they would enter into the kingdom of God. Heaven was on their mind. Where are you going?

Where are you going? Like children waiting to find out what school we will be assigned to next we wait and we wonder and we hope it is to a place where we will enjoy the bliss we desire to achieve. Where are you going? It is an eschatological question reaching to the core of our faith, of our understanding of God, and our human existence. Where are you going?

Movement 2 – Our Salvific Assumptions

We want to assume that we are going to heaven. We want to be sure about the next chapter and the hereafter. This is a big decision, and we want to be sure about the choice we make. This is where faith comes in. We make a decision to believe and we suspend all doubt. We say “yes” to Christ and then rest with the assurance that roller skates or not, we are going to make it to heaven. When asked the evangelical question, if we are going to heaven, we say yes we are because of our faith in Jesus Christ. This assurance, this non-doubting stance gives us hope and a solid ground as we make our way through the rest of life’s mysteries, troubles and challenges. We may not know much, but we know, with an assurance that we are going to heaven.

We are given the assurance, but maybe we still wonder. We say, “yes” and then wonder “what now?” Are we supposed to do something, are we supposed to be someone to assure our place in glory? We still wonder if we are going to be given a place in heaven. Can it be that all people who have said “yes” and claim to be Christians are assured a place in heaven?

The Jews thought that those who were blessed and favored by God were those with resources, with power and with the means to live well. God had blessed them in this life and would certainly bless them in the next. The rich man in Jesus’ parable must have been blessed by God. He had the fine purple linen, he feasted sumptuously every day, and he was living well. Surely God had blessed this man. Surely this man is favorable in God’s eyes. Surely this man would be assured into heaven. The Jews would have been sure about this man’s hereafter; he was headed to heaven.

We say that we are all assured to heaven, but let’s be honest, there are some that we are more sure of than others. There are those who are blessed with a winning smile, with a likeable personality, and with a deep knowledge of the Bible. We would look at that person, well dressed, in great health, walking with a deep sense of connection with the Lord and say, surely this person is going to get into heaven. Surely God has blessed this person and will continue to bless this person. We are sure about this person’s hereafter. We look at these people and we wonder about ourselves. We wonder if we can be sure about our place with the Lord. If you pray every day, if you read scriptures every day, are you assured a place in heaven? If you go to worship every Sunday, are you assured a place in heaven?

There are some who are so sure that they can almost see their next home. Individuals who have already picked out their room in the Father’s House. When we were in Mississippi, the pastor of one of the churches said that he wasn’t sad about Katrina, because his home wasn’t here. He wasn’t grieving because all that he lost was temporary. Instead, he was rejoicing that he had a home in heaven and that was where he

was headed. His sense of assurance gave him hope and peace in a difficult time. He was sure where he was going. Heaven was on his mind and he lived his dream.

Can we walk with that kind of assurance as well? Can we walk with a kind of bravado, walk as if we are carrying a “get into heaven free” card, feeling proud and safe? Can we have that kind of assurance so that we refuse to listen to other religions; we refuse to question, and rest in our faith? We have accepted Jesus Christ as our savior, we have been baptized, we go to church, we read our Bible, and we pray every day so we should be in. We have said the proper words, we have gone through the proper rituals, we have done the correct gestures, so we should be assured a place in heaven. Just as the rich man in Jesus’ parable, just as the pious, faithful Christian, we should be sure about where we are going.

Movement 3 – The Great Surprise

Jesus challenges our assumptions. The very one we place our faith in, the very one on whom we base our assurance of our salvation challenges our assumptions of who is going to heaven. Jesus challenges our assumptions and the assumptions of Jews who were listening to Jesus. Jesus tells a parable to the Pharisees and the crowd listening to him. He begins by setting up and describing the two characters. On the one side you have the rich man, dressed well, liked by everyone, and clearly blessed by God. On the other side you have Lazarus, a poor man covered with sores, invisible to the rest of the world, an inconvenient person and an eyesore to the world. The Jews would have thought about these two characters and would have assumed that the rich man was the one blessed by God. He was what everyone wanted to be. He had what everyone wanted to have. He was truly blessed and truly on his way to the Glory Land. Yet then the shock, both die, and Lazarus is taken up while the rich man finds himself in Hades, tormented by flames. Can you imagine the shock? Can you imagine the surprise for the Jews? They just opened a can of nuts and found a snake jumping out. They all just did a standard Jerry Lewis double take. The unexpected occurred and the Jews, the Pharisees, the temple leaders, the people who have gathered to listen to Jesus were all shocked and surprised at this twist in Jesus’ parable.

It reminds me of a *South Park* episode when a bunch of the people go to heaven and meet St. Peter. When all of the people are gathered St. Peter then says to them, that as it turns out the Mormons were right and the rest have to go to hell. Before the shock can even set in, the rest are dropped into the flames and the torments. It was a shock that no one was expecting.

This is what Jesus is doing in his parable, he is sending the very person that no one would expect to be with Abraham to that place of bliss. Lazarus was not favored. Lazarus was not blessed but was unclean, poor, and broken. This parable is near the end of a collection of sayings and parables when Jesus is challenging the idea that the rich are favored by God. Jesus is challenging the idea that the wealthy are assured a place in heaven. Jesus is claiming that the poor, the one who is forgotten and desolate is the one who will experience eternal bliss.

All of a sudden nothing is what it seems. Like a “Mission Impossible” episode, the characters have changed roles and we no longer know just how to react. And now we are moved to wonder. This parable should challenge our assumptions. If the one that everyone assumed would go to heaven doesn’t, then maybe the ones we assume will get

to heaven won't. Maybe it isn't just how well we memorize scripture. Maybe it isn't how well we pray or how often. Maybe it isn't just going to church or saying "yes" to Jesus. The philosopher and mathematician, Pascal, talked about making a divine wager upon the existence of God. He said we would take a chance that God does or does not exist and then live our life. So to err on the side of caution we wager that God does exist, we say the necessary words, and live with the assurance that all will be well. We have made that wager and taken the chance that Christ is the way to heaven. Yet Jesus offers this parable that shakes up our assumptions, that surprises us and makes us wonder if perhaps we should question and worry about our own lives. Jesus challenges our assumptions.

Movement 4 – Just Poetic Living

Jesus reverses the ideals of how one gets to heaven. He does not focus on what one has, on who someone is, on how much someone knows, but on what someone does. Jesus is focusing on the relationships, the co-existence between people as the barometer for heaven. Jesus is reversing the ideals of how one gets to heaven.

Perhaps to try to understand what Jesus is saying we should not look at the result, at who gets to heaven, but at the getting there. Perhaps we should look at the lives lived before we look to the lives lived after death. The rich man lived a good, enjoyable life, and maybe a moral life. Every day he found himself stepping over the feet of Lazarus. Maybe, every day he found himself walking around the living corpse of Lazarus, shooing away the dogs that have come to lick his open wounds. Yet never did the rich man reach out to Lazarus. Never did the rich man offer a seat at the table to Lazarus. Never did the rich man go out of his way to help Lazarus. The rich man's relationship with Lazarus was broken, was a chasm that ended up separating him from the comforts of heaven and into the agony of hell.

Think if there is an executive of a company. This is a man who worked hard to build his company in a fair way, and after years of persistence made things work. He was not a bad person, he went to church, he threw generous parties, and he was good to his friends and his family. He was someone who had a sense of morals and values that were in line with Christianity. At the steps to his office building was a homeless man, veteran who never received his benefits, who was wounded physically and mentally and turned to alcohol for comfort. He was a derelict who plagued those who entered the building, whose sight was offensive. Each day the executive would walk around this homeless, broken veteran. Each day he would avoid the gray and glass stare, and keep his change to himself. In the end we would expect the executive to be in heaven with our Lord, and the veteran would pay for the poor choices he had made. Yet in Jesus' parable, the veteran would be at the side of Abraham, and the Executive would be suffering the flames of hell. And when the executive would ask, "why," maybe Jesus would respond, you have walked past this man again and again, he was at your doorstep, and you never extended the good life that you enjoyed. Now he is at peace, and there is a chasm between you and him.

Do you see? It is not just having good morals. It is not just going to church. It is not just being nice to your friends, but is the way you are living all of your life with others. It is the way you are living into all of your relationships. Praying every day, memorizing scripture, even going to church, which are all good things, are things you can do as an individual. You don't need to be in a relationship with anyone to do these things.

Yet people are suffering and hurting and looking for help and compassion. We are called to look to those people.

The preacher and scholar George Buttrick said that the rich man is called to a “fundamental neighborliness.” This is not just being helpful. This is not just offering a handout, but more. Buttrick writes, “The story offers no support to the glib assumption that [the rich man] would have fulfilled [his] duty had he dressed Lazarus’ sores and fed his hunger. True charity is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not spasmodic or superficial. Ameliorations such as food and medicine are necessary, but there is more fundamental neighborliness.” D.H. Lawrence talked about a “greedy giving,” a giving for ulterior reasons so that we can be assured a place in heaven. That is not enough. It is not enough to be nice to people, it is not enough to give to charity from time to time so that we can ignore the suffering of others with a clean and clear consciousness. We are called to enter into a relationship with the other. Take this seriously, because each step over the poor is a step away from God. Each step that avoids the wounds of our brothers and sisters is avoiding the wounds of the cross. We are to have faith, but not just in words. We are to have faith but not just with surface actions. We are to live our faith. We are to articulate our faith with our very lives. Jesus calls us to love our neighbors, especially the ones with whom we fear the most, we hate the most, we despise the most. Jesus calls us to love our enemies, to bless those who persecute us. Jesus calls us to tend to the poor, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit those sick and in prison or we will suffer. This is not new. This call is not radical, but the reminder. The prophets have called us to a similar life. Isaiah calls us to us to life a life of peace and service. Jeremiah reminds us that we need to take care of the most vulnerable of our society, the unemployed, the hungry children, the single parent, the broken veteran. These are the ones we are to have a relationship with as we live, as we witness, and we articulate our faith with our hands and feet. Jesus challenges the assumptions of salvation. Jesus challenges our assumptions of our salvation. Saying yes is not enough. We must do our yes.

Movement 5 – Saving Relationships

And here is the amazing thing; our salvation will be lived through our relationship with the poor, the least, the broken and the suffering. This is an amazing thing. The weak, the hopeless, those who have to rely upon our help to survive will be the ones who will help us live into our salvation. The relationships we form and we tend will be relationships that will bring us closer to our Lord. For in tending to the wounds of the sick we tend to the wounds of the cross. In feeding the hungry we feed our starving Lord who is hanging and suffering. In offering a home to the homeless we take Christ from the cross and offer him a resting place. When we tend to the wounds of others we grow closer to our Lord, to our Christ.

We are not just looking at the person as another human, but as the presence of Christ. The ontology of our relationship changes with the world with our Baptism. When we are baptized we then enter into a new relationship with the world, with our brothers and sisters in Christ and with our Lord. Our relationships change and Christ is calling us to honor those relationships. They are strangers no longer, but our brothers and sisters. They are no longer aliens, no longer outcasts, but children of God. Who is sitting at your doorstep? Who is wounded that you are walking around every day? In the suburbs this is a more difficult question that we have to ask, and one which we need to take very

seriously. Across the street is an institution where young women are struggling to name and claim their own identity, their place and purpose in life, how can we help and be present and show a way to Christ in their own struggles? Around this church are families who are living in isolation, in their homes, separated from their neighbors and from contact. How can we reach out? How can we be a place where relationships can be formed, where the wounds of isolation can be tended to and a community founded on the grace of God can be formed? Here in this church are individuals who are wounded. Here in this church are people who are limping, even as they hide their wounds with a smile and a façade of bliss. How can we reach out and be present to those who are hurting? Just a couple miles east of us are families who are struggling to make ends meet. There are children who are surrounded by violence, fathers who are facing despair, and mothers who cannot keep hope alive. How do we address the hurts and the wounds of Philadelphia? How do we honor our relationship with the world?

With whom are you broken? With whom are you struggling, are you angry at, frustrated with and concerned about? How do you work to heal the wounds of those relationships? How do you work to reconcile the hurts so that, in the name of Christ, you can honor your relationships?

These relationships can save us. Not our charity, not our scripture readings, but the way in which we tend to the wounds of those around us. The least of the world can assure us of our salvation.

Movement 6 – Heavenly Relationships

Where are you going? Are you sure and is heaven on your mind? We hope we are assured a place with God in heaven, and trust that through our faith we are given that place. I don't want to suggest that ultimately we can earn our salvation, because ultimately it rests on the actions of our Lord. Ultimately our salvation does rest on our faith in Jesus Christ. Ultimately our salvation is assured through the actions of Jesus Christ. Ultimately there is nothing we can do to claim our salvation. Yet we are called to live our faith. In one sermon, Robert McClelland, calls the people to stop worrying about the afterlife. He claims that our focus on the afterlife is misplaced, and instead we should live into the responsibility of our faith. That is what we are called to do, to live our faith, and not worry about our salvation.

Let's be honest. There will be times when we walk over Lazarus. There will be times when we want to ignore the wounds that are festering and tend to ourselves. But we are compelled by Christ to go back to the poor and to try again and again to make things right. We are compelled by Christ to show our love for the Lord by loving the poor, the broken and the wounded. We are compelled by Christ to live into the new relationships that have been created through the cross. We are compelled by Christ to break through our fears, to break through our stubbornness, to break through our blindness and to offer the hospitality of heaven here and now. We are compelled by Christ to love, to love and to love some more. Even when it hurts, even when it is difficult we are compelled by Christ to show our faith.

Where are you going? Next time someone asks you that question. Next time you find the track in your face, don't answer heaven. Instead say that you are going to your doorstep, to care for the wounds of the poor, the hurting and the broken. Where are you going? Say that you are going to love your neighbor, and your enemies. Where are you

going? Say that you are going to show grace and mercy, and in doing that in the name of Christ, you are assured of your salvation.
AMEN