

Sermon – Luke 16:19-31
David R. Lyle
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“Smashing the Gates”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. The dog and the cat were relaxing in the warmth of the sun as it poured through the window of the front room. Their thoughts wandered in a theological direction. Who, they each wondered, was God? The dog reflected on her life, and her life was good. She lived in a lovely home and always had food and water. Her owner took her for long walks and played frisbee with her at the park. There was never a shortage of squeaky toys or tummy rubs. Her life was full of blessings, and these blessings were all freely given to her by her owner. Her owner, she thought, must be God! Who else would bless her with so much? The cat’s life was equally full. He lived in the same lovely home, and his food was even better. He wasn’t troubled with long walks or frisbees, but there was a delightful scratching post and an unending supply of balls of yarn. The cat had everything he could ever want, and more, and all of it was given to him freely, as if he deserved it. The feline theologian thought, “Who is God? I think I am!” In the end, they were both mistaken, but it just goes to show how our attitudes are shaped by our perspective. What do we have, and where does it come from? What are we to do with it all, and who is our God? Our answers to these questions shape not only our theological reflections but our lived theology, who and how we are in this world in relation to God and to our fellow people.

2. There are no cats in today's parable, but Jesus does include a few dogs. They don't seem to be theologians, but they do illustrate the discrepancy between the unnamed rich man and poor Lazarus. The dogs, having perhaps had their fill at the rich man's table, then come outside to lick the open sores which marked Lazarus's body. Unlike the dogs, Lazarus has nowhere near enough. No shelter, no food; neither health nor wealth. He is, it seems, utterly forsaken, shut out from the goodness of life by very real gates. He has nothing. Who and where is his God? On the other side of the gate, we find the rich man, so caught up in his wealth and all it affords him that he is seemingly unaware of the existence of Lazarus. His is a particularly acute if all too common form of evil. Jesus does not say, or even imply, that the rich man wishes ill upon Lazarus. He is perhaps not even aware Lazarus is there. That's the wonderfully horrible thing about gates, walls, and boundaries; if you build them well enough, high enough, thick enough, you need not even know who is on the other side. Who, after all, wants to be reminded of poverty when attempting to have a good time? And in a pinch, one can always put the "problems" aboard a plane to Martha's Vineyard. Out of sight is out of mind, after all.
3. While the rich man creates a godlike existence for himself, it turns out the true God is on Lazarus's side all along. Death comes for both of them, as it will for all of us. And neither of them can bring anything with them. The rich man leaves his riches behind; Lazarus leaves his poverty. Their situations reverse with seeming permanence, Lazarus carried away to be with Abraham, the rich man buried and sent to the torment of Hades. You have to almost admire the man, whose wealthy habits of entitlement are not so easily forgotten. Suddenly mindful of Lazarus, he assumes the once-impoverished man is at his beck and call. Perhaps he can come and cool of the man's tongue. Or send him, the man asks Abraham, to warn my brothers of the fate that awaits them if they do not change their mind. But Lazarus need not go anywhere; he is home, on the right side of eternity's gate.

4. The man's brothers already know all they need to know, just as the man did in this life. The law and the prophets are not lacking in clarity. Today's words from Amos are enough to remind them, and us, of God's utter seriousness when to come to our call to care for those the world calls lowest and least. God wasn't joking about that stuff. Even without the law and the prophets, we are hardwired to know the difference between right and wrong, as any child whose hand gets caught in the cookie jar will shamefacedly tell you. It's not that we don't know the difference between right and wrong, it's that we so often don't care. Which make ignorance so seductive. What we pass off as innocent ignorance is more often deliberate denial. Pastor Leah Schade points out, "there is an ethical significance to not knowing. This happens when ignorance, denial, and active resistance to justice lead to immoral acts that affect not just individuals like Lazarus, but whole communities of people who are not 'known' by the powerful and wealthy." Our gates and walls are not excuses for not seeing, whether it's through wrought iron slats or across Austin Boulevard. Jesus speaks to us today with impassioned urgency, opening our eyes to see that the people the world values so little are of eternal worth to our God. In that light, we are invited to what Johann Baptist Metz, a German priest and theologian, calls "a God-mysticism with an increased readiness to perceive, a mysticism of open eyes that sees more and not less. It is a mysticism that especially makes visible all invisible and inconvenient suffering, and – convenient or not – pays attention to it and takes responsibility for it, for the sake of a God who is a friend to human beings." We begin to see in this way when we volunteer at Harmony or help refugees resettle. How else is God calling us to open our eyes to those who, with both their needs and gifts, are right in front of us?
5. We know all this deep in our bones, that our lives are not to be lived for ourselves, that what we have is meant to be shared as a blessing for others. Jesus doesn't only remind us of this today; he makes it possible. It's not the

ethical reminder that opens up new ways of living. It's new life itself. We don't need someone to come back from the dead to tell us what we, like the rich man, already know. *We* need to be brought back from the dead. Jesus casts his lot with those outside the gates when he is crucified outside Jerusalem. The poor, the lost, the forsaken; these are not forgotten by God, not in this world or the next. In his dying and rising, Jesus crosses the chasm between life and death once and for all, and all other boundaries are erased; all other gates overthrown. Jesus calls us to follow him into the ways of God's Kingdom now. To be content with what we have. To love God, not wealth. To work for the well-being of our neighbor, and to do so with thankful hearts, seeing in this work not a burden upon our living but a vocation for our lives. Jesus has come back from the dead, and he has brought you with him into newness of life. Why hide behind the gates? He is your God, and all you have comes from him. To him shall you one day be called home. He calls you now, with open eyes, to follow him. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.