

Loving the Messenger
September 30, 2007
First Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Barbara E. Davis
Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16
Luke 16:19-31

There is a folktale from Vietnam called “Little Lizard’s Sorrow” that I would like to begin with this morning. It takes a few minutes to tell, but I invite you to listen, with an ear to the parallels between this story and the parable which Sarah just read for us:

There was a beggar traveling through the countryside who came across a rich gambler. This gambler liked to play a game with his wealthy friends; the game went something like this: each person would bet an item of equal value from their possessions and then the friend would try to name something among their possessions that the gambler did not own himself. The gambler had played and won this game many times, but he was surprised when the beggar offered to play.

“But you have nothing of value to wager!” the gambler exclaimed.

The beggar replied, “I will wager myself, for who I am is all I really possess; and you can wager all the things which you believe you possess.” The gambler could not resist this risk and so he bet all of his possessions with the confidence that the beggar could not possibly have anything the gambler did not already own.

With that agreement, the game proceeded, and the beggar pulled a chipped cup from his small bag and asked the gambler if he had in his possessions a chipped cup. The gambler searched fervently through his possessions and even through the belongings of all of his servants. But he, as well as his servants, deemed themselves too wealthy to keep a chipped cup, any that had been in their possessions had been discarded. The gambler was forced to admit his defeat, and he turned all his possessions over to the beggar.

“Do not despair,” said the beggar, “you have lost only what you believe yourself to own – your possessions.” And so the beggar invited all the poor of the city to the gambler’s house to take what they wanted of his possessions, and the beggar left, taking only himself, which was all that he believed he owned.

The gambler, said to himself, “Tsk, tsk, tsk, how could this have happened?” and he became smaller and smaller, until he shrank into a tiny lizard that scurries up and down the walls, eternally fretting his lost possessions, saying “tsk, tsk, tsk.”ⁱ

I first heard this folktale when I was teaching middle school language arts years ago on the Lower East Side. I do not remember how my class of eighth grade girls responded to reading it, but of all the things we read that year, this story comes back to my mind the most frequently.

When I heard the parable again from Luke’s Gospel about Lazarus and the rich man, I could not get this folktale out of my mind. Some of the parallels are obvious: the beggar like Lazarus, has much more than what other people realize, but each of them are content with what they do have. The gambler, like the rich man, is overly confident and also appears to be uncaring of anything but his own wealth. In the end, they suffer the same fate, that of endless sorrow for

what they lost. Neither comprehends that their own selfishness led them to this fate; instead they seem destined to lament their loss eternally with no real recourse.

I have to confess that Little Lizard's Sorrow is easier for me to remember and understand than this parable Jesus tells. I understand what Little Lizard's Sorrow is about, the story helps explain why lizards make that "tsk, tsk" sound, and it also reminds each of us to be aware that our possessions are not the most important things in our lives, and that we should not be greedy and over-confident about our wealth. I can step right into the folktale, for even though I cannot relate precisely to either character, I know I should aspire to be more like the beggar and less like the gambler.

The parable in Luke chapter 16 is much more convoluted. One layer gets pulled back only to reveal yet another layer and then another. Like the disciples around Jesus, I find myself uneasy, looking around to determine if he is going to explain this teaching or just leave it for our own interpretation. At first glance, the parable points simply toward that reversal of social roles from earth to heaven. This switch is one that the Gospels' often emphasize – that the poor are to be blessed in heaven and the rich can plan to have a much more difficult time getting through the pearly gates.

When we hear this passage, we think the rich man is in Hades because he walked over Lazarus day after day and never once offered him any kind of help, interestingly, that reason is not mentioned at all as the reason why the rich man was being tormented. In fact, no specific reason is given, except the reversal cited by Father Abraham: "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here and you are in agony." This news is not good news to anyone who seeks and finds some comfort on earth.

Some biblical scholars are quick to suggest that in Jesus' time it was believed that "the blessing in this life were a sign of God's favor, while illness, poverty, and hardship were signs of God's displeasure;"ⁱⁱⁱ therefore, this reversal of expectations would have been a big surprise to the people to whom Jesus was speaking. While it is true that are plenty of scriptures that support this way of thinking, there are many others that do not. People in Jesus' time were also ready to hear something different, for we know that many of them embraced these reversals he taught with relish.

So we must ask, who was it that Jesus was speaking to in this parable? At the beginning of this chapter, Jesus is clearly addressing the disciples, but it seems there were some Pharisees in that crowd also, who ridiculed him concerning the parable he taught just before this one, a parable about a shrewd manager. In response to their ridicule, Jesus turned his attention and his teachings to them. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus is the longest part of that teaching to the Pharisees.

Pharisees make frequent appearances in the New Testament; they are often foils for Jesus' teachings, and they are very interested in him and often appear among the crowds, asking him questions. Usually, the Gospels lead us to think of the Pharisees as being the "bad guys" and Jesus and his followers being the "good guys." The Pharisees were a Jewish sect who held tightly to the prophetic ideals, often interpreting these ideas into legislation or rules. In particular, they were known for the emphasis they put on ritual purity, not just in the Temple as many believed, but also at home. They are the ones who followed and encouraged many of the food purity laws that are often challenged in the Gospels. They also believed in the resurrection of the dead, which distinguished them from other groups at that time, such as the Sadducees, who were part of the Temple Court.ⁱⁱⁱ Like Jesus, the Pharisees were very interested in reforming the

Judaism of their time; so we must be careful to read with cautious eyes, because often they are portrayed as more hostile and sarcastic than they likely were to Jesus' efforts of reform.

Given that the Pharisees are Jesus' audience for this parable, how does that help us understand the parable differently? First, we assume that Jesus meant for the Pharisees to relate most closely to the rich man. Verse 14, just before this parable, even introduces the Pharisees as those "who were lovers of money." One of the lessons for the rich man in this parable is that the chasm between rich and poor actually gets more pronounced after the time on earth. It is a surprise that there is less opportunity in heaven to heal what separates these two men.

Second, there is a clear warning about the importance of loving the messenger. The rich man wants very much for his brothers not to suffer his fate, however, according to Father Abraham they have the information they need, just as the rich man and Lazarus did. Jesus is firmly inserting himself into the tradition here; there is no question he is a Jew attempting to reform Judaism of his time. He points directly to Moses and the prophets and says, "there are the messengers, why can't you hear them?"

Lastly, he uses the Pharisees' belief in the resurrection of the dead to foreshadow their lack of understanding and belief in Jesus himself as a messenger of good news. The rich man in Hades believes that his brothers would believe the message if it was brought to them by someone who went to them from the dead, but Father Abraham takes his suggestion a step further and concludes that if someone has Moses and the prophets and does not listen, not only would they not hear someone from the dead, but they would certainly not believe someone who had *risen* from the dead.

It is interesting that Lazarus is continually in the messenger role. In life, the rich man is oblivious to Lazarus as a messenger of any kind, even though his presence is an opportunity to view the world in a different way. In death, it is Lazarus whom the rich man wants to be his messenger, even though the breach which separates them will not allow it. This parable directed at the Pharisees suggests their inability to hear the messengers beyond their legislative interpretation of the law. It goes far beyond just a parable about the dangers of wealth. It is a parable meant to overturn rigidity and open the hearts and minds.

What, though, does this parable mean to us? Where do we insert ourselves into its narrative? It is a hard parable to enter. We know too little about Lazarus to relate to him, and we know too much about the rich man to admit any likeness. We probably share the most identification with the brothers, because like them we still have the potential to hear the messengers around us, but in contrast to them we have the advantage of having heard this parable to be more alert to the potential messengers around us. But is the message for us to simply pay more attention to the opportunities around us, to hear more clearly the messages of Moses and the prophets? This understanding may be a first step, but there is more here for us to consider.

What nags at us about this parable is the very beginning description of the rich man and Lazarus in life. The most detail is given to the interaction after each of them dies, but it is really what could have been different in life that interests us. The description in the afterlife of the gulf that separates the rich man and Lazarus is an easy detail to pass over, but it is incredibly critical. For in indicating it as a detail of the afterlife, it suggests that in life that separation did not exist.

So in life, the relationship between the rich man and Lazarus could have changed. As intricate as the details are about the afterlife, the *potential* in this parable is about what could have happened in life for the rich man and for Lazarus. The rich man, like the gambler in the folktale I told earlier, never understands the potential that was within his grasp. So like the

gambler, whose fate is eternally lamented, the rich man too is divided from the potential of life by never realizing it existed. This parable for us can be a reminder of the powerful importance of the potential to change.

There are numerous issues about which we like an opportunity to instill change. They are as small as cleaning out the junk drawer in our kitchen and as big as wanting to bring God's vision of peace and justice to the world. The potential to enact change on these things and the countless things in-between, is what makes life so miraculous. For we do not fit in this parable either as Lazarus or the rich man, we fit as both. Depending on the moment, we may be the one who walks over someone in need, our eyes so focused on the future that we cannot see the present; the next moment we may be the one being passed by, our poverty exposed and dismissed.

We are also the brothers, oblivious that the messengers sent to us could have a profound impact on us if we had the sense to listen. And sometimes, just briefly, we are disciples sitting at the feet of our rabbi, empowered by the beauty of the potential we each hold, inspired by the love that surrounds us, rather than asking who will sit at the right and who at the left. It is a moment when we see and hear clearly the messenger. We get up from that spot filled with the potential of living, filled with the hope that the next time we see Lazarus we will wash his wounds and offer him bread, filled with the hope that next time we will give water to the tormented; filled with hope, we put the chipped cup back in our cupboard, waiting for the day when we need it to remind us of what is most important in life.

ⁱ Forest, Heather, "The Little Lizard's Sorrow," in Wisdom Tales from Around the World. (August House, Inc. Little Rock, AR; 1996) p. 106-110.

ⁱⁱ Culpepper, R. Alan, "Luke" in The New Interpreter's Bible, vol. IX. (Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN; 1995), p. 317.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Pharisee" in Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period: 450 B.C.E. to 600 C.E. Jacob Neusner, Editor in Chief. (Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA; 1996), p. 478-479.