

**Catholic Church of the Beatitudes
Santa Barbara, CA**

The Rich Man and Lazarus – A Gospel Story Retold

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26th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C), Sept. 25, 2016

Reflecting on **Lk 16:19-31**

Pease be with you! (and also with you)! The reading of today's gospel will be woven into a contemporary retelling of the parable of "the rich man and Lazarus," so please—be seated. Make yourselves comfortable.

The re-visioning of scripture, especially of a Gospel parable, for our time, our place, and our culture can be a risky thing. Those who are literal-minded and don't understand the nature of narrative might even call it blasphemy. But bringing stories up to date (*aggiornamento*, as the Italians put it) can also be helpful, especially if the effort gets us thinking anew about the parables we take for granted.

The updated paraphrase I would like to offer of the story of "the rich man and Lazarus," as told in Lk 16:19-31, does not agree in every detail with its model. It takes some liberties. But the original gets preserved, you will see, within our fictional re-telling. Just listen to Anne as Reader 2 if you want the authorized Catholic version of this account, and bear with me as Reader 1 for the counterpoint. I'll start.

* * *

Once upon a time, Jesus was living in a homeless shelter a few blocks from Wall St. in lower Manhattan. One morning he walked into the Starbucks at 99 Wall St.— the one on the corner of Front St., next to the Citibank Building. By the way, it's just a few blocks east of the Trump Building, at 40 Wall St., so it's in really good company.

Jesus entered the fashionable coffee-shop by a side door, trying not to draw attention to himself. He looked tired. A young black woman who worked there, Martha, was bussing tables. She was a friend of his. He quietly asked her if she could find an unfinished cup of coffee for him to drink, along with some water, because he was thirsty. He winked and whispered to her, "There's no sense throwing good coffee, or even a cup of water, down the drain!"

Martha really loved Jesus for the way he identified with and lifted up the poor. In less than a minute, she emerged from the kitchen with a recycled cup o' Joe and some water for him to drink.

Presently Jesus was approached by some men in finely tailored suits—real power dressers, who were clearly somewhat amused by Jesus' scrappy appearance. One of them actually had heard this preacher holding forth a few weeks earlier in the pocket park next to Trinity Episcopal Church, at the corner of Wall St. and Broadway. He seemed welcome there . . .

Oh, did I tell you that Jesus had tried to preach on several occasions on the steps of the nearby Catholic Church, Our Lady of Victory, at 60 William St.? Well, that didn't quite work out. The priests there always shooed him away, because he was disturbing their peace! The Wall St. Synagogue up on Beekman St. was equally unreceptive to what Jesus had to say; they always told him to "move on!"

The well-dressed businessman, who had heard Jesus earlier, spoke up: “Hey Jesus, how about telling us another story?” He probably knew that a story from Jesus wouldn’t exactly make him and his friends comfortable, but what’s a coffee break without a wake-up call?

When Jesus began to talk, several other well-dressed Wall St. people (bankers, traders, lawyers) found themselves drawn nearer to him. A small crowd was gathering. His words were not easy to ignore. And his striking eyes, once they connected with yours, were so penetrating that it was hard to look the other way. Here is the story Jesus told:

There was a rich man who dressed in purple garments and fine linen and dined sumptuously each day.

There was a wealthy businessman who had a killer job on Wall St. He pulled in a 7-figure income, and was always dressed in finely tailored Brooks Brothers suits with Arrow shirts and Liberty Silk ties. He ate sumptuously each day—only the finest cuts of meat and the best vintage wine.

Near his door was a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who would gladly have eaten his fill of the scraps that fell from the rich man's table.

In the alley next to the skyscraper where the rich man worked, there was a homeless man named Lazarus. He usually hid behind a dumpster. He had no running water; he was filthy and smelled of sweat. His skin was broken and bleeding in places, and he could not get any medical help because he had no insurance.

Dogs even used to come and lick his sores.

But Lazarus had a heart of gold. He made friends with whatever animals came to his alley. He would often climb into dumpsters to pull out scraps of waste food to feed both himself and his four-legged friends. Some-

times a “street dog” would lick him to thank him for his kindness. That was comforting.

When poor Lazarus died, he was carried away by angels to the bosom of Abraham.

When poor Lazarus died, the heavens opened up. Angels singing gorgeous music appeared all around him. They sang him a celestial lullaby. They carried him to a place of wonder and beauty, where all his tears were wiped away. The cataracts were gone from his eyes. For the first time in many years he could see clearly. He saw that many of his friends and relatives were there waiting for him. All were bathed in the light of Love.

The rich man also died and was buried.

When the rich man died, he received the finest funeral that money could buy, attended by an A-list of influential bankers and business men. But there was no opening of the heavens. There was no gorgeous, angelic music. There was no one waiting to greet his spirit. He found himself in a cold and dark afterlife, where the light of Love was very distant—so dim, that its warmth simply could not be felt.

From the netherworld, where he was in torment, he raised his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he cried out, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me. Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am suffering torment in these flames.'

From the domain of the dead, where he pondered his mistakes, the rich man looked up and saw Lazarus, the homeless man who used to hang out in the alley next to his skyscraper. Lazarus was seated with the Holy One! The rich man cried out, “Lazarus, you remember me, don’t you? You used to beg outside the same Starbucks that I went to. I even used to give you some spare change . . . sometimes. Remember? Come now! Be a good boy and bring me a sip of water. I’m dying of thirst.”

Abraham replied, ‘My child, remember that you received what was good during your lifetime, while Lazarus likewise received what was bad; but now he is comforted here, whereas you are tormented.’

The Holy One replied, “Whatsoever you did to the least of my children, that you did unto me. In your selfishness and pride you neglected those in need, especially your neighbor Lazarus. Now the tables are turned. The last have become first and the first must indeed get used to being last.”

Moreover, between us and you a great chasm is established to prevent anyone from crossing who might wish to go from our side to yours or from your side to ours.

“What separates us,” said the Holy One, “is greater than ‘The Great wall of China,’ even greater than the ‘Great Wall of Mexico’ for which you and Mr. Trump arranged the financing. (And yet, my clever Hispanic children still manage to cross it!) . . . But *you!* You and those like you will never cross the ‘Great Wall—the Great Chasm—of the Afterlife.’”

He said, ‘Then I beg you, Holy One, send Lazarus to my father’s house, for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them, lest they too come to this place of torment.’

Then the rich man, who could not quite grasp the idea that Lazarus was no longer his servant(!), said, “I beg you, Holy One, send Lazarus to my father’s house. My five brothers will recognize him and heed his warning not to live as I lived, so as not to end up here.”

But the Holy One replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets. Let them listen to them.’

“Did your brothers not have Moses and the prophets of old?” asked the Holy One in reply. “Shouldn’t their voices be enough?”

The rich man said, “Oh no, Holy One, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.”

The rich man replied, “My brothers are not very good at understanding scripture, Holy One. But if someone they knew actually visited them from the dead, *that* would make them pay attention.”

Together:

Then the Holy One said, “If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone should rise from the dead.”

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