

Who, and Whose, Shall We Be?

Every July 25, KSSK radio, you know, Perry and Price guys, play Christmas carols all morning long.

They do that to remind folks how many people die in accidents during the months before Christmas -- and to remind all of us to slow down and improve our chances of being around for Christmas this year.

Today's readings are something like KSSK's "Christmas in July" because the readings have an awful lot to say about life, about death, and about Christmas too.

First the Christmas part, and then we can hele on to life and death!

Doesn't this morning's parable about the rich man and Lazarus remind you of a Christmas story?

Doesn't it remind you of that very famous one: the one actually entitled "A Christmas Story" -- the story of Ebenezer Scrooge -- the rich man who is visited by ghosts of Christmas past, present and future -- the rich man who repents, as in "turns around," as in "has a metanoia," as in "changes his mind" about just about everything he thought he knew.

"A Christmas Story," by Charles Dickens, is a tale told every year at Christmastime and it's a tale about choices, and consequences, and money, and what we mean to one another.

The parable Jesus tells us today is very much like the Scrooge story; and, the parable, like Scrooge's story, has its roots in a folktale.

There's nothing new under the sun!

And because Jesus takes up and embellishes what is a common folk tale from his day, let's NOT join our fundamentalist friends who love to say:

"Here we have a birds eye view of the afterlife!"

"The good go to heaven and have front row seats watching the bad burn to a crisp for all eternity!"

What fun!

It seems likely that Jesus isn't talking about what the after-life is like any more than Charles Dickens, the one who brought us Ebenezer Scrooge, is trying to say that ghosts really exist.

These stories, both Jesus' and Dickens, are meant to shed light on how to live, not about what happens to us after we die.

The difference between Mr. Scrooge and the rich man in the parable is that Scrooge, at long last, gets the message, and changes -- while the rich fella keeps missing every chance to turn around; perhaps because during his life he misses every chance to turn around, so that not turning around becomes a habit that is very hard to break.

The rich man's dilemma is a testament to the power of money and to the power of social position and to the power of the sense that those who have -- **deserve what they have** -- it is a testament to how power and position and money can blind us to **who** we really are; can blind us to who we are **meant to become**; can blind us to the truth of **who we belong to**.

Scrooge eventually comes around and happily opens his heart and his wallet (yes, in THAT order!) to people he once despised -- people he now sees as his brothers and sisters.

The rich man in the parable, legend calls him Dives, well, he isn't so astute.

Even though he calls Abraham "father" and sees Lazarus snuggling up to old Father Abraham, dopey Dives doesn't make the connection that since he and Lazarus are children of the same father, they are also, and have always been, brothers.

He doesn't make the connection when Lazarus is tossed outside his gate and he doesn't make the connection even now, in death.

Instead, he instructs Abraham to send Lazarus to him with a drink -- because after all, Lazarus should serve this rich man -- that's the way of the world!

Now, Jewish belief is that even sinners in hell can repent, turn around, and when they do, Abraham himself goes into hell and brings them into paradise...but the damned need to see and need to hear and need to change.

Alas, the rich man is a poor student.

You see, the flames are intended not so much to punish, but to encourage a change of heart.

But Dives isn't there yet, and the class on change will not be cut short, not even to quench his thirst.

Maybe with enough heat it will occur to the man that money and prestige and power really aren't God's ways; really aren't what we are created for -- and maybe, like Scrooge, he will come to see that life is intended to be lived with generosity and humor and freedom from greed and freeing others from need: that these are the gifts of God for the people of God....

But the rich man's not there yet.....

Since Dives Plan A doesn't work (issuing commands), he quickly moves to Plan B: begging!

Begging on behalf of his social equals, his equally tight wadded, uptight, privileged brothers!

Abraham responds that Dives plan to save his brothers is a non-starter.

They have the Holy Scripture, which over and over commands and cajoles and pleads that we have mercy on the poor, that we welcome the illegal immigrant, that we care for those with little, whether or not in our eyes they are deserving.

This is the way and the wisdom of God, after all.

But Dives is still clueless, and so he insists that the wisdom of God isn't wise enough, and he doubles down, arguing that God's way of giving us his Word just won't cut it -- but Dives has the solution!: send someone back from the dead!

In fact, since Lazarus won't be busy bringing me some water, sent HIM back to my rich, self-centered brothers: that will be sure to do the trick!

And here is where the irony of Jesus' wonderful story is especially sweet.

All this time, Dives is dealing with two dead guys, Abraham and Lazarus, and none these dealings with the dead move him an inch from his conviction that the world runs on money, power and prestige!

If a face to face meeting with the dead can't melt Dives' heart, what chance will it have to melt his brothers' hearts?

And so the rich man sits in torment, not unlike the people of Jerusalem in Jeremiah's time who were besieged by the Persians, armed to the teeth and circling the city gates, ready to destroy everything inside.

It seems all hope is lost.

But what Jeremiah comes to see, what the rich man may yet come to grasp, is that just when it seems there is no hope --there is hope.

As Jesus concludes his story today, we are left to wonder whether the rich man and his brothers, like Scrooge, will find life.

Scrooge gets the message, and opens his windows and heart and wallet to those in need.

Will Dives and his brothers do the same?

Will they allow the life that Paul writes so eloquently about, will they let that life in, will they let that life penetrate?

For you see, what Paul discovers -- after his own rude awakening to the ways of God -- is that selfless giving places us squarely in the river of creation -- a creation that starts as Nothing -- only to become -- Everything.

In the act of selfless giving, we find harmony with the Mystery we call God, we find the narrow door that leads into the Kingdom of God: a kingdom that turns the world's expectations and judgments and certainties upside down; a kingdom where everyone is welcome.

And so, I say to you what Paul said to Timothy so long ago:

"Be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, storing up for [your]selves treasure ... for the future, so that [you] may take hold of the life that really is life." 1Tim 6:19

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