



Richmond Hill Reflections

“Seeing Lazarus” (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

September 22, 2019; Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Reading: Luke 16:19-31; Selected verses from Chapter 9 of the *Bhagavad Gita*

The bible can be tricky, and today’s reading is a good example. Or maybe we trick ourselves. We focus on details and so miss the point. Many a preacher has got caught up in the portrayal of “heaven and hell”. What’s the nature of the suffering that caused the rich man’s thirst? What does it mean he can see Lazarus? How deep is the chasm? I wonder if we do this to deflect from bigger questions the parable asks. After all it concludes a section about wealth. The afterlife is only in it because it’s a reversal story, common in Jesus’ day. So, let’s look at the parable again.

Lazarus lives at the gate of a man so wealthy he can afford to wear purple, an expensive colour of cloth in Jesus’ day. His only comfort is from the dogs, presumably guarding the rich man’s property. Unlike the dogs, he ignores Lazarus, pretending he doesn’t see him which is clearly not the case because in the afterlife he refers to Lazarus by name. We shouldn’t be surprised. At its core the story is about how we treat others. The rich man’s attitudes aren’t changed by his death, which shouldn’t surprise us either. There’s a teaching that our condition after death is a mirror of how we lived. If we’re open and loving toward others, thus toward G-d, we’ll experience loving companionship. If our hearts are hard toward others, then that same companionship will be a hell. Similarly, the rich man becomes a beggar in death but seeks help from a place of privilege. He still expects those beneath him to respond to his need. His eyes are closed to anyone but himself.

That’s the crux of the story. The rich man closed his eyes to Lazarus’ plight even though he had, as Abraham pointed out, a scriptural obligation to help. He ends up as he does not because he’d been wealthy, any more than Lazarus was comforted because he’d been poor. That reasoning has long been used to maintain unjust structures. The Bhagavad Gita alludes to this blindness. Those who don’t recognize the lord in human form shuttle from death to death, falling into cruelty and greed. It suggests that when we don’t see others as who they really are, as spiritual siblings, but focus only on what they can do for us, we will perpetuate systems that bring great harm to others.

Despite the sacred wisdom we’ve had for millennia, it’s clear we keep closing our eyes, caught up in our own needs and forgetting about the impact on others. At least I know I keep closing my eyes. I don’t need to look very far to find Lazarus. Seniors are Lazarus, set to the side even when in the same room as others. When I went with my dad in preparation for his surgery, the nurses, doctors and others would speak to me first. There’s no reason why they couldn’t have spoken to him first, and if he was unsure, I could add information. But it was easier for them and for me to answer than redirect them. He ended up being invisible even though it was him having surgery.

We're a funny species. We often get caught up in our discomfort and end up marginalizing someone. Lazarus is anyone we don't want to look in the eye, be they near us in a restaurant or panhandling on the street. But we need to. We may not be able to help with money or counsel, but we can say hello and restore their humanity. It was because he ignored Lazarus as a person, not just his needs, the rich man was on the side of the chasm that was far from others.

We do this globally too. One situation that jumps to mind is the group of Bahamians who after the destruction by Hurricane Dorian were on board a boat to come to the US but then told that any without a visa would have to disembark. They are Lazarus in many ways. An obvious one is that they're islanders. People from island nations are some of the most at risk from the impacts of our climate crisis, especially those that are low-lying like the Bahamas. Leaders of island nations have been begging at the gate for years, yet many western governments keep averting their eyes. A big focus of lowering emissions is green technology. Among other gains this will reboot our economies. This doesn't help Lazarus much and actually maintains the privilege of the rich man. As we mobilize for climate strikes this week, may we consider not just our needs, but the needs of the Global South so disproportionately impacted. In another way those turned away are even more Lazarus. Many without papers are from Haiti. Mostly undocumented, they form an underground economy in the Bahamas, not unlike "illegal" immigrants in the US and Canada. Living in shanty towns, many of their homes were destroyed. And being from Haiti they're Lazarus yet again. Haiti has been Lazarus since gaining independence in 1804. The first free black republic in the world, they were charged reparations by France, a huge debt not paid off until the 40s. As former slaves they have received payments. They also faced a trade embargo. The US and other nations were afraid that their slave populations would rise up too. The world averted its eyes then, and in many ways it still does.

This history points to a larger issue that keeps making Lazaruses. The brownface and blackface photos of our prime minister highlight the ongoing erasure of racialized peoples in wider society. Those in power are mostly white, and while Trudeau didn't mean to mock, blackface is part of a history that kept black peoples at the bottom. Racial profiling similarly keeps the status quo of privilege. Indigenous people experience the same. As named by a host in the second season of "First Contact", the Indian Act stripped people of their identity and made them subservient, not just externally through government, but Indigenous peoples internalized that narrative as well. In the end we're all poorer for this dynamic. Like the rich man who could have reached out Lazarus and honoured his humanity, we can do the same. As the Bhagavad Gita suggests, when we do, we honour that we're all a reflection of the same divine love and live our lives in constant praise. Otherwise we're the rich man, far from Lazarus because he was actually alienated from himself.

The bible can be tricky and clearly life is too. But as the Bhagavad Gita says, when we discover the truth at the heart of life, we will be freed from the cycle of suffering. It's a simple truth. We are all part of the same gift of love and so called to care for each other. We need to see Lazarus, and to affirm what we share. If we do that, then life may become less tricky after all. Amen.