

*In the* recent lectionary of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus said things that challenged the listeners. To pick a few: “Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple (Lk. 14:27)”; “There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance (Lk. 15:7)”; “You cannot serve God and wealth (Lk. 16:13b).”

This last example proved a pretty disheartening one for some. A college student actually told in my face that he would quit attending the church, because he thought I told him that rich people cannot go to heaven, because his heart was set upon becoming rich. Even a renowned author of the book, “Rich Dad, Poor Dad” wrote in one of his books that he left church, because the Bible said that the love of money was the root of all evil. He was miffed, because he did not do anything evil. Obviously, he loved his money.

*Now Jesus* went further than

merely talking about money in today's selection of reading. It appears that Jesus pinned being rich to going to hell, while being poor to entering heaven. Before we become dismayed over this seeming injustice, we need to catch the undercurrent that set up the context: the rich man passed by the poor Lazarus everyday, and did not notice him sprawled at his gate.

What is alarming is that there is no prerequisite for the beggar to enter the heaven: the parable does not say whether Lazarus was a devout Jew who fell on a hard time, or whether he gave all his possessions to the poor. All he did was lounge about some rich guy's gate, being the eyesore to everyone in general—except to the dogs that licked the sores that covered his body.

*What is* even more alarming is that there is no reason why the rich man had to go to hell: all he did was enjoying his life and the abundance that his riches brought him. Is it wrong to enjoy life and one's fruit of success?

It is simple, actually: the rich man lived sumptuously, while oblivious to the tormented person at his gate. That lack of compassion earned him the abode in hell. It was not because he was rich; it was because he *refused* to do something about the evil right at his gate. Lazarus entered paradise, because he suffered in this life, but received no help or love. Therefore, he now basked in the heavenly life.

***This underlying*** premise of Jesus is not going to please many. This parable operates on the theology that life balances out in the end. If we suffered in this life, if we had been oppressed, rejected, and abandoned in this life, we will be comforted in the next life. If we lived sumptuously in this life, while ignoring the evil at our gates, then, we are off to hell in the next life—so the parable intimates.

According to this parable of Jesus, confessing Jesus as Lord and savior has nothing to do with salvation. And if you are the sort of the Christian who is hot on the

inerrancy of the Bible as the living Word of God, then it will be difficult to say that Jesus made a theological error with this parable.

***This parable*** should set off an alarm bell in the well-off Christians, because, it challenges the rich people's tendency of insulating themselves from what is revolting, unrefined, or abhorrent: the poverty. The rich can afford to do so, while the rest must bear with it. The parable demands our attention to the evil that is happening right at our gates—that is, right in our own community and nation.

Thanks to the internet age, we receive the news from all around the world. What happens on the other side of the world is as vivid as what happens right at our driveway. I curse the internet, because I cannot appeal to the plausible deniability at the Pearly Gate.

***This parable*** of Jesus highlights what is injustice. At the first glance, we may feel it was

injustice to send the rich guy to hell for enjoying his life. But to God, injustice is consigning Lazarus to the life of torment, because the very person who was *capable* of rectifying the evil right at his gate ignored, rejected, and abandoned the tormented person. That injustice motivated God to balance out life in the end.

What is injustice to God is that the regular Joe loses his house, lists his house at half, or even at the third of the price he paid for, and goes bankrupt, while the bank executives and auto executives get bailed out. How many of those execs had to sell their houses and declare bankruptcy?

What is injustice to God is the working poor and the elderly get their services slashed, while the rich get the tax breaks, because we need to balance the budget. That is so convenient, because the rich do not need the kind of services on which the poor and the elderly absolutely depend!

What is injustice is that the large

international corporations do whatever they please to exploit the natural resources in the poor countries, and leave the land in ruins for the natives, when they are done. The corporations do not have to live and raise their children there! Injustice offends God, and God hears the cry of the oppressed.

*Now we* got that theological stumbling block for the wealthy out of the way, let us focus on what Abraham told the rich man. The rich man was concerned about the loved ones he left behind at his father's house. That should be the dead giveaway to any one who still believes that the rich guy just did not know Lazarus was at his gate, and was wrongfully condemned to hell.

The rich guy realized that his family members were slated to join him sooner or later. How did he know that? They all ignored Lazarus, and the rich guy knew it was wrong. That is the part that is not spoken, but clearly implied in the parable.

Jesus was indeed a master storyteller. So the rich man begged Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his beloved family.

But Abraham tells the rich man: "they have Moses and prophets; they should listen to them."

What Abraham refers to is the first five books of the Old Testaments which the ancients believed to have been written by Moses, and the books written by the prophets. In other words, they could go to the synagogues and hear the soul-saving lessons any Sabbath day they wanted.

The rich man still insists: "If someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent." Ah, repentance! He knows now exactly what his sin was. But Abraham deals him the blow: "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

**The question** is: How does one receive one's faith? The rich man's reasoning was that if a person appears from the dead,

people will believe. Abraham's reasoning was that if they did not believe when they were preached to, they will not believe, even if a dead guy returns from the dead.

With whom would you agree: the rich man, or Abraham?

What would motivate us to repent: a miracle of having a dead one return from the dead, or hearing another believer or a preacher witness to the Gospel? In short, is seeing believing, or is hearing believing? There was a time in America when people gave word. Now we sign our names on the dotted line. Words do not count much any more.

Do people need the shock value, in order to believe? At what point does the miracle turn into a sideshow? In order to save us, does God need to show us the sign or a miracle every time, or just send prophets to speak the word?

**In the** Gospels, we see the evidence that many people demanded the sign, not the proclamation. The

contemporaries of Jesus demanded signs, in order to be convinced that Jesus was from God. Jesus even comments about such. To list a couple:

<sup>8</sup> Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." <sup>39</sup> But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign; but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah (Mt. 12:38).

<sup>11</sup> The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, seeking from him a sign from heaven, to test him. <sup>12</sup> And he sighed deeply in his spirit, and said, "Why does this generation seek a sign? Truly, I say to you, no sign shall be given to this generation (Mk. 8:11, 12)."

***In order*** to cultivate faith, Christians have relied on hearing the proclamation, not on seeing the sign. Seeking the sign is actually the sign of lacking faith. Faith is trusting in God. God tells God's children the promise, and God's children cherish the promise. This is what Paul said to the Romans:

So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ (Rom. 10:7).

Jesus never attempted to convince the skeptics by showing the signs: his miracles were not for the show. John captured the recalcitrance of the skeptics well, when Jesus fed the thousands with five loaves of bread and two fish:

<sup>29</sup> Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." <sup>30</sup> So they said to him, "Then what sign do you do, that we may see, and believe you? What work do you perform (Jn. 6)?"

Not once the Bible teaches that faith comes from seeing the signs. Miracles incite further demands of miracles, and seeing the sign is distinct from trusting in God. Faith rather comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ. Faith still works the same today: if we do not believe by hearing what is proclaimed, then we would not believe, even if Lazarus returned from the dead and witnessed to us.