

Travel Stories: *The Invisible Man* - wk 8

Rev. Scott McGinnis - First Presbyterian Church of Newton, KS - Sept. 6, 2020
Luke 16:19-31 *The Message* paraphrase (Adapted from Eugene Peterson's book *Tell it Slant*)

As we continue with another of Jesus' stories while walking through Samaria, I'll continue to draw from Eugene Peterson's book *Tell It Slant*.

If you were to study the Gospel of Luke in the original Greek, you might notice a recurrent phrase in Jesus' stories. The phrase is "a certain man" *anthropos tis*. Each main story begins with something like, "**And now here is another story of the same sort - a certain man...**" with the implication that these stories are reinforcing a similar point. That they're all trying to reinforce each other.

Each story is also similar in that they feature central characters who are lost in various ways: a lost son being alienated from a parent, a manager lost by squandering the trust of his employer, and in today's story the beggar Lazarus is lost from society, living at the margins of society because of his sickness and poverty. Then in each story an offer of grace changes and reverses the plot line. The younger brother responds appropriately in repentance. We don't know how the older brother responds, but we know that he is generously welcomed to the party and we find ourselves hoping that he will rejoin the family celebration. In the next story, the response of the shrewd manager is not stated, but the evidence seems to suggest that he changes his life and shares the grace and generosity of his employer with others.

Now in a slight difference, Lazarus doesn't himself do anything, but finds something done to him - he is raised from the condition of "*dogs licking his sores*" to life in "the bosom of Abraham." He experiences the good life for the first time in the afterlife. Then the rich man, seeing Lazarus for the first time, wants his five brothers to have a chance to repent.

The rich man's five brothers, like the elder brother in the first story, are left in limbo by the way Jesus tells the story. We don't know whether they will repent. But there are signs they will. Signs of resurrection in each story.

Unexpected grace and a turning point in these lives stands out as Jesus tells story after story. *Why?* Because something has taken place in and around Jesus that changes, or more accurately, reverses "the way things are." The lost and exiled state of the characters is about to end. Turning to Jesus' Way is implied as the appropriate response throughout Jesus' storytelling: Are Jesus' listeners going to turn to Jesus' Way? From His beginning sermon announcing it's time to turn from our ways to the Way of Jesus' Kingdom and in each story He tells we see our ways are not Jesus' Way, so we must decide to follow.

In each of the stories, there is a repentance and a question is left, "Will the remaining lost characters repent?" The older brother and the five brothers of the rich

man. Like the characters in Jesus' stories, we have opportunities to decide to follow Jesus.

Before Jesus told this story He had called out to people in His first sermon, **"The kingdom of God is at hand; repent"** (Mark 1:15 RSV). That word repent meant: "turn around" from your way to Jesus' Kingdom Way. Jesus is gathering God's people to participate in a new way of life, a new rule, a radical reversal of "the way things are." And he preached the good news, **"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor."** (Luke 4:18). This is the new way things are.

Jesus included the blind and mentally and physically handicapped in His Kingdom agenda. He begins with the poor, the outsider, the outcast, "whosoever will may come," without regard to status or reputation or qualification. Jesus lays the groundwork for including all "whosoever" by making visible and giving a voice to the ones who are never seen or listened to. Lazarus is an example of this.

The Lazarus story breaks our stereotypes of the men and women we assume are included as leaders in Jesus' Kingdom mission. His first recruits take us by surprise. The rich, powerful, and influential are not excluded, plenty follow Jesus (the rich man Joseph of Arimathea and the influential rabbi Nicodemus are named among Jesus' followers), but there is no suggestion that Jesus was only

going after “the brightest and the best” to participate with Him in establishing His Kingdom.

Every society finds ways to turn the poor, sick and exploited into invisibles they’d rather not think about. Not Jesus, not the society of His Kingdom. The Apostle Paul highlights this way of Jesus, when he rather unflatteringly describes the people Jesus called, “**God deliberately chose men and women that the culture overlooks and exploits and abuses, chose these ‘nobodies’ . . .**” (1 Cor. 1:28 MSG). Finding a place for the “least of these” in God’s Kingdom is then the work for all of us to do in Jesus Name.

Now I want to say something about the ending of the story. He highlights the ending leading us to ask “What will the five brothers do?”, and thereby, “What will we do, will we go Jesus’ way?”

We start out assuming that we are listening to a story about Lazarus. But when the story is finished we realize that Lazarus was just a setup: this is a story about the rich man’s brothers. So *THIS* is the conclusion: *what is to become of the five brothers?* The same with the two prior stories that also began with the phrase “a certain man.” *What was to become of the older brother in the Prodigal story, did he repent of his self-righteousness and go back in to join the family celebration. What was to become of shrewd manager? Did he change his life and become shrewd at being good?*

This story ends in the same way the Prodigal brothers story ended. Will these five brothers join the celebration or not? With Jesus' emphasis on the living brothers, Jesus moves us to a realization that the resurrection is happening all around Jesus as people turn from their direction in life and follow Him who gives eternal life.

I want to finally note that this is the only one of Jesus' parables where a character is given a name. Lazarus. And since there was a real Lazarus that Jesus raised from the dead in the Gospel of John, I want to close by connecting this story with what we learn in John.

Notice that seeing a person be resurrected by Jesus, did not necessarily lead people to follow Jesus. Some believed in Jesus, but raising Lazarus was also the final straw that set people in motion to kill Jesus. John 11:53, **“So from that day [the day that Lazarus was raised] from that day on they planned to put him [Jesus] to death.”** And also, neither did the resurrection of Jesus from the dead ten or so days later cause everyone to follow Jesus.

What Jesus does in His stories is invite us into the story of His kingdom. Without Jesus we wouldn't know there is a bigger story than our lives. Jesus' invites us to participate in the world of God's grace and eternal life. Jesus' unexpected recipients of grace shows us there is lavish, unexpected, free grace from God the Father and hope in Jesus for eternal life in His Kingdom. That's what these stories tell us.

And these stories are then finally about our response to Jesus: *will we follow Jesus? Will we accept God's grace shown to us in Jesus?* He promises eternal life in His Kingdom. He promises every outsider, like Lazarus, like the shrewd manager, like the prodigal son, is invited to the banquet in heaven. *You lucky bums*, the celebration is for you!

Would you pray with me?

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for welcoming us into the celebration of heaven.

As we live our lives, we ask for Your wisdom.

As we seek to do good, we ask for Your forgiveness for the times we don't know the good You want for us.

As we listen for Your Spirit's voice, we ask You to lead us in the paths of Your righteousness.

Thank You for being faithful to forgive us and call us Your children.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.