

Knox Uniting Church Cluster

Sunday September 28th 2025 (RCL: Pentecost +16, Prop21 , Ord 26 - Year C)

Sermon (reflection) by Russell Croxford at Ferntree Gully Uniting Church

Bible passages: Amos 6:1a, 4-7. Luke 16:19-31

“The rich man’s table”

The universe is an amazing place. So many fascinating things are taking place out there in space. One of the most mind-boggling phenomena is the existence of ‘black holes’. Black holes are objects so dense, with a gravitational pull so strong, that nothing, not even light can escape from them. All surrounding matter, including other stars and planets gets sucked into them, disappearing from existence. It is understood that black holes are formed by certain massive stars, having reached the end of their lifecycle, collapsing in upon themselves, thus no longer able to give out light or anything. They just gobble everything up.

It's a rather sad picture actually. These once bright, energetic celestial bodies, radiating light and heat dramatically transform into a colourless void which gives out nothing and just lurks in space as a sinister and dangerous monster, absorbing anything in its vicinity.

This black hole phenomenon is very much what is happening in our gospel reading! In this parable we see a picture of this huge space, or bottomless chasm – call it a black hole, which exists between the haves and the have-nots, between self centered living, and God’s heart for the poor.

This rather dramatic and apocalyptic story tells the tale tell of two men on very different trajectories in life and in death. A very poor man named Lazarus and a very rich man.

In their earthly lives there is a massive contrast between the two men. A huge chasm. One is super wealthy with the finest clothes and luxurious lifestyle, including, one would presume, a large home and a table spread for a king. Lazarus is on the opposite side of the chasm. Homeless, hungry, afflicted with sores and hoping to eat just what falls from the rich man’s table.

Then, in the afterlife the rich man finds himself in a fiery hell, while Lazarus goes to the better place. And in the afterlife, there is also a huge chasm, as in life, but their situations have now reversed. This chasm now seems to be between heaven and hell, and apparently, it’s a chasm that cannot be crossed. Naturally the rich man isn’t happy to be where he is, and he calls across the chasm to plead his case to Father Abraham, ‘up there’, but it’s to no avail. It’s too late. He’s fallen into a ‘black hole’ that he can’t get out of.

Now it’s important to note that this is *not* meant to be a description of heaven or hell. Nor is it a parable about the afterlife per se. It’s a parable about how we should live in *this* life. Yes, it tells of eternal consequences, and we do note Jesus’ earlier reference to “being welcomed into eternal dwellings” (16:9) but I think we should understand ‘eternal dwelling’ as very much a ‘here and now’ thing, and it’s the chasms of *this* life we should watch out for.

It seems clear that the chasm in this story has been created by the rich man. He is responsible for it and it’s of his own making. So, how did he create this chasm?

The context of this parable is important – as always! This is the 5th of 5 parables Jesus tells to a gathered crowd that included his disciples along with the Pharisees. The recurring theme is, ‘wealth’ and how it’s used. While teaching on wealth he has his eyes particularly on the Pharisees about whom he’d earlier said, ‘loved money’ (16:14). Interestingly, two of the five parables start with the line: “There was a rich man” (16:1, 19)

Some key themes jump out of today’s reading:

Firstly, we see again the ‘great reversal’ of the gospel. Everything is turned upside down. The gospel message is unexpected. It presents the countercultural alternative - the opposite to the message of the world. The first will be last and the last will be first. In God’s realm, wealth is not the virtue it’s made out to be in our world. Poverty is actually the virtue!

Leading on from that we see again here the recurring gospel theme that God is on the side of the poor. We recall the Beatitudes earlier in Luke 6, “Blessed are you who are poor...blessed are you who hunger now...blessed are you who weep now...blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you.” (Lk 6: 20-22). This parable thus should be of great comfort to the poor. Do you remember that old African American spiritual song, “Rock my soul in the bosom of Abraham”. That’s the longing of an oppressed people – to find reward in heaven – if not in this life, then certainly in the next. That’s the comfort Lazarus found when he died, in the bosom of Abraham in this story.

But ‘comfort for the poor’ is really not the main purpose of this story. The main thing is the challenge to those who are rich, including the Pharisees, but also *anyone* in Luke’s community who may happen to be well off. Jesus isn’t saying the rich will be condemned simply because they are rich. But he is warning them about the *trappings* of wealth, and we recall earlier statements about it being hard for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God (Lk18:18-30) and to “be on your guard against all kind of greed” (Lk 12 15).

The warning from Jesus is that true life is *not* found in money. (there’s the ‘great reversal’ again.) Paul picks up this in his letter to Timothy where he exhorts Timothy to flee from the love of money which is the “root of all kinds of evil” (I Tim 6:10-11). Paul concludes by telling Timothy to “take hold of the life that is truly life” (v19). For the rich guy in our parable, he naturally thought his wealth was ‘true life’. How wrong he was. It was not true life at all.

Another warning to the rich here is that the rich guy knew full well about Lazarus at his gate. He was just ignoring him. It’s actually a proven fact that wealthy homes in those days had special benches at their gates for the poor, because it was expected they would be given something by the owners. This was an expectation. But this rich guy ignored that too. Furthermore, he would have known the ‘law’, as Abraham reminds the guy after he died, he’s had the message of “Moses and prophets” all along, as a clear and constant reminder to look after the poor (v31).

Speaking of the prophets, our reading today from Amos carries a very clear and challenging message to the powerful and rich of his day. These are the people who are ‘complacent and secure’ (Amos 6:1), who ‘lie on beds inlaid with ivory’ and ‘dine on choice lambs’, ‘drink wine by the bowlful’, ‘use finest lotions’, but ‘do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph’ (v4-6). Thus, they incur God’s judgement – just like the rich guy in our parable. Such people are creators of chasms.

As an aside at this point, a question: Does God's grace and mercy – even towards people like those abusing their wealth, ever run out? Does he reach the point where he's had enough. Does the black hole get to a point where it remains a 'dead star' and there's no longer any hope? What are your thoughts? I guess my view is that God never gives up on people, even though he will always pronounce strong judgement on the evils of injustice they perpetrate.

As I was preparing for this message, I came across a great prayer by John Van der Laar.

*It's a simple choice, really, one that should be easy.
Do we create need – Building our lives around a void
that we feed and feed but is never satisfied;
Storing more than we will ever use, to silence our fear,
while ignoring the cries of those we have left empty?*

*Or
Do we create plenty – Finding satisfaction in enough,
finding joy in what can't be owned and life in what is not for sale;
Seeking to share life and joy and food and wealth,
so that these blessings are multiplied and celebrated.
Teach us, Jesus, in our homes and families, our communities and neighbourhoods,
our countries and continents, to always make the simple choice
to create plenty wherever and however we may. AMEN (John Van der Laar)*

Do we create need, or do we create plenty? It's a great question. Today's parable is about a rich guy who created need and was absorbed by his own need - need in his own life to have more and more – a need that could never be satiated - like a black hole! Sucking in more and more and never giving out. And at the same time, his need is creating another need in the poor person at his gate. Double need!

But the idea of 'creating plenty' is the opposite to that. It's about acknowledging that there is enough for everyone. It's the idea that 'I do have enough'. 'I have plenty'. 'I can give out of my plenty'. It's a multiplication concept. It's a whole different way to look at the world.

I came across a good quote about this idea of plenty. I'm not sure who wrote it: "If you have more than you need, build a longer table, not a higher wall". That's profound.

I'd like to finish with another question. Who is it that really matters to you? I'm sure you will think of loved ones and close friends. Why do they matter? Because you have a close relationship with them. Relationship is the key. Relationship is the key in our story too. The rich guy had no relationship with Lazarus because Lazarus didn't matter to him. Just like the poor and the oppressed are still so often thought to not matter in today's society. But Lazarus matters to Jesus. Jesus forms a close relationship with the poor.

Did you know that this is the only time in a parable where a character gets a real name? 'Lazarus' is intentionally 'humanized' in this story – because his life matters to Jesus. This stands in stark contrast to the dehumanized way he is treated in his life by those with wealth and power. By the way, notice that the rich guy does *not* get a name!

So, for me the challenging question is this. 'Who matters to me enough that I'm willing to give them a name - to be 'in relationship with' them, – to consider them as a brother or sister, as friend, as a fellow human being. Am I willing to give the person at my gate a name and a place at my table, because they matter to me?