

Crossing the Chasm Between Heaven and Hell to Judge and Save based on Luke 16:19-31, David Jahnke, 9/25/16

As I was reading this passage, I thought about the billions who are feasting every day which is a good thing. Meats, veggies, fruits, grains, desserts all at our fingertips. The standard of living of the rich man in our passage is now that of perhaps a third the world's peoples with another 50% having enough food. God's abundant providence has spread wondrously, especially in the last century. And this both allows and commands the food secure to "Taste and see that the Lord is good" and we hear in the Psalms.

I remembered a time back in high school when a group of friends and I were talking about our favorite things and one said his favorite thing was eating, which made the rest of us giggle. We were teenage boys so I have no doubt we all liked to eat but we just thought of eating as a given, not as something special. But the boy who mentioned this had been adopted, making me wonder if he had known hunger in his early years. Regardless, he appreciated food, tasting and seeing the basic goodness in it that we often overlook.

But the Psalmist wants us to taste and see that *the Lord* is good. There is something beyond what our eyes take in; something deeper than the wonderful tastes and textures of food and the satisfaction of filling an empty belly; a goodness and a justice that pervades life and which calls us in the breaking of bread.

Moses spoke to the Israelites about it. Feed the poor. Leave gleanings in your field for the foreigner. The prophets, time and again like Amos today, called the Israelites back to this foundational justice. That is why there was sacred bread-- the bread of God's presence-- involved in temple worship and passover celebrations; a bread which he then spoke of as His very body given for the world which he prayed would be daily for all God's people. So one of the foundations of trusting that there is a God-- that His metaphysical realities pervade this material world-- goodness and peace and love and justice-- a key is having God's goodness at our fingertips in daily bread.

The rich man in the parable did not listen to Moses and the prophets. And the hungry around him thus suffered...and because they suffered, so too would he suffer after his death. He loved his money more than his neighbors. So the justice of God in every morsel of bread he did not share demanded justice.

The recent scandal at Wells-Fargo is a perfect example of the love of money being the root of great evil. Thousands of intelligent employees signing up customers up for accounts they did not agree to and then charging them fees; hundreds of their supervisors turning a blind eye to this or encouraging it; surely dozens of higher level managers knew or heard rumors and did nothing.

Why did they not act? Because year by year, the C.E.O. and others in charge pushed up the goal numbers and the incentives for cross-selling or pressing customers into new accounts they did not need and would not pay attention to...; even legitimate cases of cross-selling were rooted not in what was good for the customer but what was good for the bank. And indeed, Wells-Fargo's assets and stock prices soared. Everyone cared more about money than what is right and good.

Some who have been fired received a portion of their just due; but many more who received much greater benefits are not being held accountable. Our passage today says that one day, they will be, if they do not repent and bear the fruits of repentance.

Now we need to talk about the purpose and length of God's judgment and punishment. In the parable, no one can ease the suffering of the rich man in Hades because of a great chasm between Heaven and Hell that cannot be crossed by anyone. The rich man pleads that Abraham send someone from the dead to his brothers to warn them. And Luke ends the parable with a wink and a smile by saying that the brothers would not listen even if someone rose from the dead.

Jesus knew he would rise from the dead. He had risen by the time Luke wrote this. So the chasm was crossed by Jesus who descended first from heaven to earth and then descended into Hell, as our creed says. And there the righteousness of God destroys sin, evil and death at its very source. This will be complete one day. Evil will not live on in eternally the gleeful torture of the unrepentant. The apostle Paul promises that death and the evil sins that cause it shall be destroyed; not just separated; not actively hurting and damning; destroyed!

This must be true because God's punishment is never for the sake of nor end with condemnation, pain and other horrors. How could any loving Father want that for His children? It is always for the sake of turning people to love and abundant life in Him.

So in Jesus' rising from the chasm of death, the warning that the rich man desired for his brothers comes to the whole world. Cross and resurrection proclaim, "Justice has risen and is coming. Let your sins be put to death by committing to Jesus and his way of repentance and forgiveness. Because if you cling to your sins and do not believe in goodness and mercy, you may cling to them in the end which would mean dying with them as they are destroyed."

Here is the true understanding of Hell-- a final separation from God and Life in the form of annihilation. There is a limit to punishment and suffering; they will end. And if God will not hold judgment eternally over us (and James says mercy triumphs over judgment), do not do so to others, even the unrepentant, and do not let others do it to you.

But repentance means more than turning from sin-- it also means turning back to the wonderful things of God. Doing this makes everything new.

I started watching a documentary about a young filmmaker names Patrick O'Brien who was diagnosed with ALS. He was a young goofy, vibrant presence; an internet sensation and nighttime dancing DJ who gradually lost control of his entire body. But he did not lose his goofiness or his presence and he gained a great deal as well. He said this amazing thing:

“ALS is always referred to as this ugly disease. What if it’s actually a beautiful disease? What if the more physically disabled I become; [what if this] is inversely proportionate to my journey inward? I also witnessed the transformation of people around me. They stopped focusing on things that are not important and started focusing on things that are...” [From Transfatty Lives]

There are three basic responses to injustice and suffering in this world. The first is a shrug of the shoulders; “glad it’s not me; who said life is fair?” This basically presumes there is no justice and rationalizes carrying on in self-service. The second response realizes something is wrong but does nothing to change it because others are to blame or it’s not my business. That is easier when it is not personal. But when it becomes personal as in the case of Patrick and his friends and family (or when someone comes out of the closet), then we are forced to journey inward and bring to life the justice and mercy deep inside us and the world. That is the third option. Doing something about injustice again and again, even though we cannot solve the whole problem.

I had a strange experience the other week. It was really the pinnacle of a gradual revelation that so much of my pain and angst has been connected to self-centeredness. If the boys or Hailey got in the way of work that had to get done or if work was excessive and got in the way of things that I had to do for my family or me, I would get upset or down.

But over time, I have realized that when you are covered by grace, there are no “have tos.” Everything comes as gift in which I “get to” do things that God and others call me to do. And I have found true satisfaction. I am content in the Lord doing nothing or most anything as long as it is not bad...and I get the added reward of pleasing others! No doubt I need to decrease and Christ increase. But I think I am starting to taste and see the goodness of the Lord in all peoples and activities.

So be willing to step out of yourselves. Like Patrick with ALS, journey inward, reflecting upon and praying about and for the excellent things at the heart of all life. And when interruptions come from outside in the form of requests or the suffering of others, give them a taste of the bread of life. Remember that Christ is with them and you and is calling for unity in the one loaf you both are a part of. Break open the bread of life and watch joy and feel satisfaction as a result. You do not have to; this is not a guilt trip. You get to...; and the rewards will be eternal for you and maybe for them as well. And God's people say...