

What Will Convince Us?
I Timothy 6:6-19
Luke 16:19-31

“One dies in full prosperity, being wholly at ease and secure, his loins full of milk and the marrow of his bones moist. Another dies in bitterness of soul, never having tasted of good. They lie down alike in the dust, and the worms cover them.” Job 21:24

“He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone rises from the dead.’” Luke 16:31

Enter the rich man—Dives as he has come to be called from the Vulgate--Latin for rich man—dressed to the nines and a gourmand to boot. At his gate sits Lazarus (meaning God helps) covered with sores and begging for the bread the rich have used like napkins to wipe their greasy hands once they have had their fill. Dives dies in full prosperity, being wholly at ease and secure while Lazarus dies never having tasted the good life. Lazarus is carried to the bosom of Abraham while Dives is buried and wakes to the fires of Hades. He appeals to Abraham and is told that in life he enjoyed good things and Lazarus evil things; now in eternal life, Lazarus is comforted and he is in agony. Fair is fair? Injustice is addressed?

Apparently not, for Jesus is still talking. Having established that there is no turning back or trading places on the other side of the grave, Dives tries to warn his brothers and means to use Lazarus as his personal messenger. Really! Abraham says in so many words. Lazarus can add nothing to the call God has already issued to Dives and his brothers through the law and the prophets. Dives begs to differ: Imagine, he says, if someone goes to them *from the dead!* *That* would put the fear of God into them! But Abraham’s response ends the matter, both in the parable and between Jesus and the Pharisees: “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”

Make no mistake: Dives’ riches are not at issue here, though riches are a contributing factor to his eternal separation from God. Nor is Jesus’ point that, in order to be saved, you need to believe three impossible things before breakfast—like the virgin birth, the incarnation and the

resurrection. At issue is our turning, our responding to God's address, our faith between the cradle and the grave. "Faith," writes theologian Eugene Wehrli, "is not credulity about a wonder. Rather faith comes from hearing the call or the righteousness of God proclaimed." In other words, faith is not believing *that* God parted the Red Sea or *that* Joshua fit the battle of Jericho and the walls came tumblin' down or *that* Mary was a virgin or *that* Jesus walked on water or *that* Lazarus (the one in John's Gospel) was dead as a doornail and came walking out of the tomb three days later practically smelling like a rose. Faith is not credulity about a wonder.

Rather faith is hearing the call of God to "go out not knowing where you are going"; faith is the response of Isaiah saying simply, "Here I am; send me!"; faith is Mary saying to the angel Gabriel: "Behold the handmade of the Lord"; faith is following Him who had no place to lay his head; faith is living to God and for the other. Before us in the world of the parables is the possibility of our turning, our changing, our repenting right now of the lives we have led thus far for ourselves, in favor of the life given us by God to live for the other at our gate.

Presumably Dives' brothers still have a shot at living such a life except, as Wehrli goes on to note, "The rich man's brothers, like himself...live the life of luxury, are men of the world...belong to the old age and are anchored in its values. They are completely incapable of responding to that which makes all things new. The parable," says Wehrli, "is addressed to a society which resembles the brothers", to a society that resembles our own. In short, the parable is addressed to us.

What will convince us that the command to love God with our whole heart, mind, soul and strength and our neighbor as ourselves (the content of the law and the prophets in a nutshell) is not optional for those who would know God or for those who would follow Jesus or for those who, by way of Christ's fulfillment of the law and the prophets, have become heirs to eternal life? What will convince us that the kingdom is won or lost around the kitchen table and on the

streets of this city, in the bedroom behind closed doors and even in this community? What will convince us if--having heard the Scriptures read and proclaimed for years and having been told the news that one has been raised from the dead--what will convince us if still we remain unchanged?

Sometimes we think that tragedy or a near brush with death will change how we live, will make us selfless or compassionate or generous. I think of Stephen King's commencement address to graduates at Vassar a few years ago entitled "Scaring You to Action". Reflecting on his own experience of lying helpless by the side of the road after being hit by a van, King says "I had a MasterCard in my wallet, but when you are lying in a ditch with broken glass in your hair, no one accepts MasterCard. [Likewise] If you find yourself in the ER with a serious injury, or if the doctor tells you yeah, that lump you felt in your breast is a tumor, you can't wave your Diners Club at it and make it go away....We all know that life is brief, but on that particular day and in the months that followed, I got a painful but extremely valuable look at life's simple backstage truths."

Unlike Dives, King was given that look before he was laid in the grave. Maybe his look will convince us too. For King, rich as he is, one of those truths was this: "We come in naked and broke. We may be dressed when we go out, but we're just as broke. Warren Buffett? Going to go out broke. Bill Gates? Going to go out broke. Tom Hanks? Going to go out broke. Steve King? Broke. Not a crying dime." In a sense, we are back to Job: we lie down alike in the dust and worms cover us. "But how long in between coming in and going out?" King asks. "How long have you got to be in the chips? 'I'm aware of the time passin' by; they say in the end it's the blink of an eye.' That's how long."

King delivered that commencement address in 2001, two years after his accident and while he was still in the throws of a painful recovery. No telling whether the word he heard about

the life he had been given to lead and had missed is still as convincing some twelve years later. We all have known people who have had close calls, survived dire diagnoses, managed to rise out of the rubble of terrible tragedy with great resolve, only to return--after a few weeks or months or years--to being the same son-or-daughter-of-a-gun we knew and tolerated before the accident or diagnosis or tragedy supposedly changed them forever.

Life in the chips or on the dole or above the fray or set in our own ways—the person untouched and unturned by God’s address that we became on our own--is a drag (literally) on the person God intends us to be. Sin it is called, though it masquerades under the guise of indifference, arrogance, insensitivity, callousness, selfishness, to name of few of our more charming traits. These traits, as the old theologians said, are deadly. They land us on the other side of the grave, according to the parable, having missed the chance to be human.

One gets the sense that even on the other side of the grave, Dives will eternally not get what there is to get about a life lived for the other. That he wants to send Lazarus to his brothers from the dead, so that they will wise up before it is too late, seems to have nothing to do with the poor, the hungry, the homeless. He simply wants to let them in on the scheme that will land them in the bosom of Abraham and at the head of the table in God’s kingdom. So even in death one gets the sense that Dives will be eternally unconvinced of the truth of the gospel.

What, then, I ask again, will convince us before the end and we go out? What will open our eyes to the humanity of the other in need and so open our lives to the human life we are called by God to live? “Here’s another scary story,” says the King of scary storied. “Imagine a nice little backyard, surrounded by a board fence. Dad—a pleasant fellow, a little plump, wearing an apron that says YOU MAY KISS THE COOK—is tending the barbecue. Mom and the kids are setting the picnic table by the backyard pool: fried chicken, cole slaw, potato salad, a chocolate cake for dessert. And standing around that fence, looking in, are emaciated men and

women, starving children. They are silent. They only watch.

“That family picnic is us, ladies and gentlemen; that backyard is America and those hungry people on the other side of the fence, watching us sit down to eat, include far too much of the rest of the world,” says King, though I would add that they include an increasing number of citizens of this nation. We know this, you and I, and like Dives, for the most part, we choose not to see this, not to let it concern us overly, not—for God’s sake—to let it change us. “God’s righteousness,” note the theologians, “through the presence of Lazarus, is a humanizing call, and only as we grasp it is a humane life possible.” Or as Jesus put it, the poor are always with us, with us as the same word, the same face, the same presence made flesh in Jesus (when did we see him naked, hungry, in prison...?). Apparently their humanity has convinced us only to keep our distance, divert our eyes, walk on by, shelter our income.

What will convince us? How is it that Albert Schweitzer, when a young man in medical school, upon hearing this very parable concluded that Africa was Lazarus at the doorstep of Europe and went out not knowing where he was going? How is it that in response to these same words we have read this morning, Schweitzer bowed to God’s claim upon his days? In Bonhoeffer’s words, I suspect Schweitzer simply obeyed, took the first step, followed.

Though I think it happens that faith takes hold of us the other way around. As in some halting way we begin to hear God’s address—maybe on a Sunday morning, but more likely on a Wednesday night eating with a family in NPIHN or Sunday afternoon feeding hungry men at Our Brother’s Place or Tuesday in front of Delio’s Gun Shop or while reading to children at Freedom School or working alongside the people of Belize and Haiti—as in some halting way we begin to hear God’s address in Lazarus at the gate, we are those to whom God’s living presence in Jesus Christ comes near, bidding us dare the life of faith—dare putting our whole trust in him. It is not some doctrine of resurrection that convinces, but, if Jesus lives, it is the life

we may live fearlessly in the face of death that makes all things new.

Pray, then, for the hard grace of God's hand turning you, clean contrary to your desire, toward a road not unlike a road at the end of Luke's Gospel called Emmaus. There a stranger will meet you—like one raised from the dead--and, beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he will interpret to you the Scriptures. If this should happen, invite him to your table. Do not leave him to beg again outside your gate. For in the breaking of bread, you will recognize the human being God intended you to be from the beginning--and I promise you, you will be changed. Thanks be to God.