

No way out: Sunday, October 1, *Luke 16:19-31*

by [Mark Harris](#) in the [September 12, 2001](#) issue

In Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus there is no wiggle room. Deeds are done and lives led, and there are consequences for each of the three characters—the rich man, Lazarus and Father Abraham. No matter what each of them wishes, desires or hopes, the matter is finished. It turns out that the rich man, not having shared with Lazarus while he begged at the gate of the house, is stuck in hell, thirsty. Lazarus cannot reach over to him and share even a drop of water. And Father Abraham, not very impressed by the rich man in the first place, seems to relish telling him off at the end. No, there is no wiggle room here. Such is life; or in this case, such is death.

We are told that we reap what we sow, and that what goes round comes round, and this is not easy news to hear. Sometimes it is painful news, at other times it seems so much a forgone conclusion as to be only a cliché. If the story had ended with Abraham telling the rich man that Lazarus wasn't fetching water because things were working out the way they were supposed to—and besides, it couldn't be done even if they wished to—we would yawn and move on.

Jesus, however, has not given us a morality play in which things work out in a tidy way, with justice for the good and punishment for the bad. He is up to something more important. In this story we have the making of a tragedy, and tragedy is closer to the truth of the gospel than any morality play. What is deeply troubling about tragedy is that it involves more than our individual will to action, or our intellects; it involves character flaws so grave that they permeate the actions of complete families and whole communities.

The rich man doesn't get it: it is not that he screwed up by not helping Lazarus while they were both alive; rather it is that he could not hear, or did not listen to, Moses and the prophets, who had a lot to say about justice, the poor and those in need. He had what Jesus in other contexts calls "hardness of heart," echoing the Hebrew sense that one's ability to have empathy for the poor and a preference for justice could be "locked up." Locking up mercy and justice affects not just the rich man, but everyone in the story. Father Abraham is put out with the rich man. Lazarus is powerless to act, even in heaven. Hardness of heart has wounded everyone in sight.

Sometimes the biblical witness is not pretty. In this case, one person is rotting in hell, the second is living it up in the heavenly city, and the third is telling it like it is. But nothing changes, even after death. The rich man seems not to have practiced mercy in his relationships while he was alive, so why should we expect that he should suddenly catch on and be saved? Indeed, Jesus makes it clear that the rich man does not understand, even in Hades. There he asks for mercy, but not forgiveness. He asks for water, but not life.

To his credit, the rich man seems to care for his kin. He believes his brothers share his diminished abilities and he thinks a sound knock on the side of the head from someone reporting in from beyond death might bring them all around. He is wrong. In a succinct and blunt way, Father Abraham dismisses such hope. "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

The tragic flaw in all this is that the rich man suffers from a deep spiritual deafness, an inability to hear and listen to the call for mercy and justice, or even the practical plea for just plain bread and some salve for the sores the dogs lick. His heart is hardened. Everything else in this drama is the unwinding of that fact.

As with any good tragedy the effect transfers to us, the audience. We see the tragic flaw in the rich man and recognize our own inability or unwillingness to hear and listen to God's word as it finds its way to us. We see our own hardness of heart in the behavior of the rich man and in Abraham and Lazarus as well, who seem disinterested in the plight of the five brothers and of the rich man. (Perhaps they are disinterested because they know they can do nothing.)

About this business of being convinced if someone should rise from the dead: We Christians *do* have someone who has risen from the dead, Jesus Christ. So it would appear that this small tragedy is not so small after all, for it suggests that if we are too hard of heart to hear Moses and the prophets, then the resurrection is not going to make things better. For those whose hearts are open, the resurrection is a wonderful gift; for those whose hearts are closed, the resurrection is a millstone.

This is one of those times when the sin of pride hits the church and the faithful with particular force. Too often we think the resurrection is proof that we Christians are on the right track—that believing in the resurrection is going to make everything come out all right. But don't be too sure. If our hearts are closed to hearing the cry for justice, mercy and bread, the words of the resurrected One will not be

convincing, but convicting.