

RICH MAN AND LAZARUS STORY UPSETS APPLE CART

It's funny how people can twist a good story all out of proportion and make it do just the opposite of what it was supposed to do. Jesus' tale about a plutocrat and a beggar is a case in point.

The only place you'll find in the Christian scriptures is at Luke 16:19-31. But it's a pretty well known story. So well known it has a way of being distorted.

It started out as a put-down of people who won't put their religion into practice. But most of the time people use it to play "ain't it awful."

Or they use it to map out the territories of the after-world. It's a funny business. About as funny as a crutch.

Check out some of the details of the story, which is usually known as "Rich Dives vs. Poor Lazarus." Except that when Jesus told it, only the poor beggar was called by name, Lazarus.

The traditional name of the rich man, Dives, is just that: an invention of church tradition, based on the fact that the Latin word "dives" means "rich."

There is nothing subtle about the picture Jesus paints. The contrast between the two men is as stark as the Donald vs. Ms. Hillary.

On the one hand is the rich fellow, a devotee of conspicuous consumption: purple velvet suits, silk underwear, gourmet treats seven days a week, that sort of thing.

On the other hand is Lazarus, an ulcerating beggar. His role is to scavenge table scraps from garbage cans and pal around with stray dogs, that sort of thing.

Then comes the reversal. The rich man kicks the bucket, is interred in the local cemetery, and finds himself tiptoeing through the coals in the realm of the dead. A rather bleak prospect.

Lazarus dies too. But in his case the outcome isn't burial and Hades. He is escorted by angels right into the presence of Abraham, where he has a seat of honor at the heavenly banquet.

How Abraham and the rich man manage to carry on a conversation across the cosmic ditch which separates them is anybody's guess. Jesus isn't particularly interested in such minor details. But what a pathetic chat it is:

"Lazarus could be your errand boy," the former playboy suggests. "Have him fetch me a glass of water; I'm frying in this joint."

"No dice," insists Father Abraham, "it's his turn to sit back and enjoy. You had your turn at the good life."

"Well, then, send him back to haunt my family. So they won't end up in this furnace."

"Sorry, Charlie. If they won't buy what they read in their Bible, they sure won't be convinced by a friendly ghost."

What do you make of that? You can sit around tisk-tisking the villain and feeling sorry for Lazarus. Which is a convenient way of keeping the whole thing at a safe distance.

Or you can waste your time trying to analyze the comforts of Abraham's heavenly condominium, the temperature of Hades, and the width of the intervening chasm.

In either case, you would be ducking the point of Jesus' story. Because he was trying to suck his audience into identifying with the rich man, not with Lazarus. Lazarus is just a foil, a bit part character in the drama.

In Jesus' day most folks would have assumed that a fat bank account was proof a person was blessed by God.

A genuine son of Father Abraham. A fine religious gentleman. The sort who was quite willing to share his leftover with the needy.

So when the applecart gets upset, Jesus' audience must end up chagrined. You only go around once in life, he is suggesting, so there's got to be more to it than just grabbing all the gusto you can get.

Maybe that's why the ancient biblical stories still intrigue modern readers. They have a way of grabbing us unawares and turning our comfortable assumptions upside down.

In this case, the tale of the presumptuous rich man exposes the bankruptcy of our own "look-out-for-number-one" attitudes.

And it opens up the possibility of caring and sharing. Which is what Jesus was driving at in the first place.

Funny how contemporary the whole thing sounds.