

“Changing the Ending”

“If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”

One of the many shows we’ve enjoyed at the Stratford Festival this year was *Little Shop of Horrors*, the musical adaptation of a low-budget movie about a plant with an unusual appetite. While we had seen the show many years ago in New York City, my most vivid memory of it was from the movie version that starred Rick Moranis and Steve Martin. I thoroughly enjoyed my afternoon at the theatre, and I found myself singing along with many of the songs and laughing at the jokes and dilemmas in which the characters found themselves. But when the show got to its grand finale, I was confused – this was not the ending that I remembered from the movie (I won’t reveal either ending in case you haven’t seen the show). My confusion led me to go online when I got home; and sure enough, there were different endings between the stage show and the movie. The show at the Avon Theatre includes the original ending from the original New York production; but when the show was made into a movie, its producers decided to give it a different – and happier – ending.

While changing the ending is quite simple in a fictional story, it is a different matter in real life. What has happened in the past cannot be changed, even though histories are often different depending on whose perspective it is written. Our personal biographies and family histories are open to individual interpretation, but the facts of our pasts cannot be changed. We might wish that the story had a different ending, but for better or worse what has happened remains the same.

As we gather in worship, we are blessed by the Word of God that remains unchanged even if it is spoken in different languages and applied to different circumstances and contexts. The Gospel message is the good news of God’s salvation for all humanity in Jesus Christ, the story that ends in the Cross and Resurrection that proclaims to us that *“if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”* (Romans 6:5). The Gospel story is one whose ending cannot be changed, because to change it would strip it of its salvific power and its message of life and hope which is meant to be proclaimed to all people in all generations.

On his way to Jerusalem to accomplish this ending in fulfillment of God’s Will, Jesus shares a parable which serve as the capstone of Luke’s prophetic critique of wealth, a theme that appears in many parts of this Gospel:

- “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” – Luke 1:53-54.
- “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” – Luke 3:7-9.
- “But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.” – Luke 6:24-25.

The audience for Jesus’ parable is once again the Pharisees, who Luke identifies as *“lovers of money”* (16:14) and who had ridiculed Jesus’ declaration that *“you cannot serve God and wealth.”* (16:13). After chastising the Pharisees as *“you are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God”* (16:15), Jesus shares a parable involving two individuals who are physically close but culturally and economically far apart:

- “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores.” – 16:19-21.

The measure of the rich man’s wealth is illustrated by his conspicuous consumption – his dress and his diet. He wears purple, which may mean that he was a high-ranking official or a member of the royal family. He was “at ease in Zion” (Amos 6:1); he had everything a person could want. At the other extreme of the socioeconomic ladder is the man who lay at his gate: Lazarus, the only character in any of Jesus’ parables that is given a proper name (in the Latin Vulgate “rich man” is translated “Dives,” but that is not the man’s name). Lazarus is described as a crippled beggar whose body is covered with running sores, and whose hunger is so great that he would gladly feast from the scraps of food that fell from the man’s table, which was probably the bread dinner guests used to wipe the grease from their hands and then threw on the floor. The depths of Lazarus’ deprivation is described with one final detail: the dogs (which probably ate the scraps from the rich man’s table) lick his sores as they pass by.

In the next episode of the parable, both Lazarus and the rich man die. Neither death is explained, although we can assume that the poor man died of disease and starvation mere steps from the opulence in which the rich man’s life ended. At his death, Lazarus was *“carried away by the angels to be with Abraham”* (16:22), similar to the manner in which God called his faithful servants into the divine presence (*“As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven.”* – 2 Kings 2:11). On the other hand, the rich man who had received great adulation in life is simply “buried.” The “bosom of Abraham” was regarded as the place of highest bliss. According to Jewish legends of the martyrdom of the mother and her seven sons in 2 Maccabees, the enemies of God may *“dismiss us from this present life, but the King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life, because we have died for his laws.”* (2 Maccabees 7:9). Lazarus and Abraham now appear in the sight of the rich man *“in Hades, where he was being tormented”* (16:23) – a surprising turn of events for those who believed that financial blessings were a sign of God’s favor, while poverty and hardship were signs of God’s displeasure.

Three exchanges between the rich man and Abraham follow; Abraham now speaks for the beggar who was given no voice on earth. While the rich man’s circumstances have changed significantly, his attitude toward Lazarus remains unchanged; he still expects the poor man to serve his needs when he cries out *“Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.”* (16:24). In his response, Abraham emphasizes how the fates of the two men have changed, and how Jesus’ beatitudes of who is now blessed and who is now cursed have been fulfilled:

- “Child, remember that during your lifetime you received good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Beside all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.” (16:25-26).

The rich man is informed emphatically that *“Lazarus ain’t gonna run no mo’ yo’ errands, rich man!”* (Clarence Jordan). The “chasm” that now separates the rich man and Lazarus confirms the finality of the judgment of the rich man (*“Then the pit of torment shall appear, and opposite it shall be the place of rest; and the furnace of hell shall be disclosed, and opposite it the paradise of delight.”* – 4 Ezra 7:36). By his actions during his life, the rich man had shut himself off from Lazarus, and now no one can reach him.

In the second exchange between the rich man and Abraham, the one who finds himself in the “pit of torment” now thinks of someone other than himself for the first time, asking that his five brothers be warned *“so that they will not also come into this place of torment.”* (16:28). But one thing has not changed: he still expects that Lazarus will be his errand boy who will warn his brothers. But Abraham refuses to comply with the man

request or to make Lazarus subservient to him; his response is that the brothers *“have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.”* (16:29). God’s Word and God’s Will have already been revealed through holy scripture, and in listening and obeying they will find the salvation that comes through living in accordance with what God has already revealed to God’s people:

- *“If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted towards your needy neighbor.”* – Deuteronomy 15:7.
- *“Is this not the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not hide yourself from your own kin?”* – Isaiah 58:6-7.

The duty of the brothers is the duty of all to whom God’s Word is proclaimed: *“Let them hear them!”* – a “hearing” that is accompanied with obeying God’s Will, which is at the heart of discipleship as it is exemplified by Mary when she responds to the word of the angel Gabriel by declaring *“here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”* (1:38).

The rich man’s third desperate plea to Abraham is a lament that conveys his despair that there is little hope that his brothers will heed the Scriptures: *“No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.”* (16:30). He hopes that a spectacular appearance of one who was dead will shock them into doing what the revealed Word of God would not accomplish. But Abraham is once again not swayed by his requests, responding that *“if they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”* (16:31), words that foreshadow the resurrection of Jesus as the mission of the church in Acts in Luke’s writings. *“If [the brothers] will not heed the Scriptures and be merciful, they show that they have placed themselves beyond the reach of God’s mercy.”* (Alan Culpepper).

Today’s Gospel lesson ends as it ended when Jesus first spoke these words to the Pharisees: a great reversal has taken place, so that Lazarus is not in the “paradise of delight” while the rich man finds himself in the “pit of torment” where the poor man suffered during his life. It is an ending that cannot be changed, as the rich man discovered through his three failed attempts. It is an ending that also cannot be changed for us, because it serves as a warning that being a disciple of Jesus means serving all people following the example of our Lord Jesus, seeking not to be served but to serve, knowing that *“as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”* (Matthew 25:40). Jesus’ commands to his first disciples are the words by which all followers of Christ in every generation must live, for *“we have no mission but to serve in full obedience to our God; to care for all without reserve, and spread God’s liberating word.”* (ELW Hymn 729):

- *“You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”* – Mark 10:42-45.

But while the ending of the stories of the rich man and Lazarus cannot be changed, there is one group in this parable whose stories can still have another ending: the rich man’s brothers. Despite the rich man’s skepticism, the brothers still have time to listen to God’s Word and obey our Lord’s call to repentance. They have the ability to heed to words of the prophet Joel that even though *“truly the day of the LORD is great; terrible indeed – who can endure it? Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the LORD your*

God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.” (Joel 2:11-13).

As we consider that place of the brothers and the good news that they still have the time and the ability to change their ending, we realize that we stand in the place of the brothers, and the question for us is whether we will hear the Word of God and repent so that we might change the ending of our own stories and in our relationship with God:

- “This is a parable, not a prediction, and we have the power to rewrite the ending. We are those who have seen the man raised from the dead and that in his name we are both able and committed to sharing water, love, and good news with all those in need.” – David Lose.

Like the brothers, we have heard the Word of God proclaimed to us, a Word that calls us to repent and return to the Lord to walk in obedience as children of the light as persons who are born anew in Holy Baptism to *“rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.” (Small Catechism)*. Unlike the brothers, we have seen one who has risen from the dead, for the heart of our faith is the good news that *“Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.” (1 Corinthians 15:20)*, and that he has freed us from *“all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil ... in order that I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules eternally. This is most certainly true.” (Catechism)*. We have the ability to change the ending of our life story when we decide to return to our Lord so that we might truly be God’s people who have been *created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” (Ephesians 2:10)*.

- “... we may regard works as a sure sign, like a seal on a letter, assuring me that my faith is right. The reason is that if I feel in my heart that the work flows from love, I am sure that my faith is right. If I forgive my brother or sister, such forgiving makes me certain that my faith is right and confirms me, and gives me proof of my belief that God has forgiven me and continues to forgive me day after day; but if I do not forgive, I must certainly conclude that I lack faith.” – Martin Luther, 1526.

Changing the ending of a fictional show like *Little Shop of Horrors* was simple; but in real life, it is a far more difficult matter for an ending to be altered. But for his brothers – and for all whose endings are yet to be written – there is hope of a different conclusion, one that is filled with joy and hope when we heed the call of God and his holy Word and return to the one who is the source of life and salvation. Through the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, we shall be changed *“in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet” (1 Corinthians 15:52)*. Our ending is changed when we choose to follow the one who *“made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved – and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:5-6)*. Our endings have changed because we have been changed – we are God’s own people, called to love God and share God’s liberating word with all people, so that all may know that in Christ Jesus the end is life. Amen.