

The Other

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Gospel Luke 16:19–31

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On Wednesday I visited the [Museum of Ethnography in Geneva](#). Its permanent exhibition, “[The Archives of Human Diversity](#),” presents over 1,000 remarkable objects drawn from a vast historical and cultural range. Just before you enter the main exhibition you’re introduced to 12 individuals who speak about their own understanding of culture and highlight an article significant to them.

One display in particular caught my attention. It was a picture of [George Tamihana Nuku](#), a Māori artist also of Scottish and German descent. In his recorded speech he reflected on the exhibition as a way for us to see one another and respect each other’s histories and cultures. His displayed quote read: “The time of the ‘other’—of regarding someone else as ‘the other’—that time is finished.” It was his call to us to stand alongside one another rather than over or against each other.

I so want George to be right — that the time of considering people as opposites to be used, exploited, or ignored would be over. Sadly, our world still struggles with this ideal, even though it is something we should continually strive for. We so easily fall into the trap of fearing the different, sometimes even violently. We resist walking together on common ground, afraid that doing so will cost us face, money, status, or power. There should be no border disputes – but we create them. This spirit of division seems to be woven into our political and social systems, which so often encourage us to distrust or attack one another — sometimes with tragic results.

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The “otherness” of the other is exactly what we see in the parable Jesus tells in Luke 16. Despite the rich man knowing the name of the beggar at his gate, he did not see an equal — someone to sympathize or empathize with. He was so caught up in his world of plenty that his world ended at the gate, he was safe and secure behind the fence he built to protect all that he held precious.

What a world within that fence! All the signs of extravagant wealth are there: he wears purple clothes. Purple dye was very expensive to produce as a result it was associated with wealth and royalty. Note how the Roman soldiers dressed Jesus to mock him as a king – “They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him. And they began to call out to him, ‘Hail, king of the Jews!’” (*Mark 15:17–18*) Then there is the fine linen which was an expensive and fancy material used for undergarments. And finally, his lifestyle: every day, was luxurious reminding us of the man with the desire for bigger barns, “Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.” (*Luke 12:13–21*)

It just couldn’t get any better! And then he died.

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Jesus then draws our attention to Lazarus. He is the only person ever to be named in the parables of Jesus. If we can make problems anonymous then we can perhaps distance ourselves from them – plausible deniability – keep things impersonal and I don’t have to be personally involved. They are the others.

Lazarus is certainly separated from the rich man. Poor, impoverished, ill, full of open sores, desperate even for the scraps that might fall from rich man's table.

How did this poor man end up at the gate? Well, he was laid there, which implies that his family and/or friends brought him. This was the place, at the gate, in sight of someone who had the resources to help but no aid was coming that would render some relief and assistance. That is an awful situation and then comes the street dogs, not the cute pets that we keep in our homes, to lick his wounds. This is not an act of comfort! It is unhygienic, shameful and degrading.

It just couldn't get any worse! And then he died.

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Now the scene changes and the parable takes us to the afterlife. One would hope that in death we would find everyone on a level playing field. Yet, to the shock of the rich man and to the relief of Lazarus there is a great reversal. This is a major theme that runs through Luke's Gospel and it is first introduced by Mary's Magnificat:

*He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty. (Luke 1:52-53)*

I spoke earlier about how people fear common ground because of what they might lose. Yet the sad truth in this parable is that Lazarus and the rich man actually stand on common ground. They don't need to negotiate common ground. They come from the same earth. They share the same lineage. They draw from the same faith tradition — both are called children of Abraham. They read from the same scriptures. A point, as we shall see, that father Abraham makes.

But it seems that the rich man has brought his life attitude into the place of the dead. The chasm in this picture of the afterlife may be, in reality, the fence he had built in the living world. There seems to be no remorse, no repentance and he is still treating the person whose name he knew when he was alive as beneath him, even though he is looking up.

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Now an epiphany as he realises his way of life runs in the family. He orders Abraham, notice he does not speak to Lazarus, to send Lazarus in resurrected form to his brothers so that they might repent before it is too late. Abraham simply states that these men have all they need to be guided by God in how they should live and use the blessings they have in life.

[Scott Hoezee states it like this:](#) "But no, they have Moses. They have the prophets. And that ought to be enough. "They already have something better than a man returned from death," Abraham says. "They've got their Bibles. They've got Moses. They've got the Old Testament Law. They've got prophets like Amos and Micah who ripped into the selfishly rich people of Israel long ago and whose prophetic upbraiding have been preserved as a warning to also future generations. If they won't listen to the living voices of scripture, neither will they listen to a dead man like Lazarus who will say to them the exact same things."

"The exact same things" lay at the gate. I wonder how many times these brothers passed by

Lazarus on their way to the luxurious parties of their sibling. There was the message of God, not a dead man walking, but a man dying before them, the forgotten one, in need of mercy.

This is not a sermon about hell, even though some might want it to be. It's about God's word being made alive and active in the world. A word that tells us to love God and love our neighbour. A word that challenges indifference and apathy towards those we exclude.

Of course, this parable as with many others, is a mirror. It reflects who God is: the God who knows our name. And in his love would not "other" us but in Jesus crosses the impossible chasm to lift us to life, to rescue us from our sores and dress us in royal robes. That is the love of God.

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But the mirror also reflects us, and that is where the challenge lies.

In the mirror we see ourselves and are challenged to stand with the neighbour not as opposites to be used, exploited, or ignored.

Yesterday at the joint congregational day away, part of our discussion led by Robert Simpson, who will be your locum for October, was about unity within the linkage.

It reminded me of the letter to the Ephesians. Paul speaks of Jesus Christ breaking down the dividing wall of hostility (*Ephesians* 2:14–18). There he was talking about a wall between Jew and Gentile, but I think it can be applied in other contexts. That those who see each other as the "other" were welcomed onto the common ground of family under the love and grace of God.

When we see people as "other", keep them nameless, then we will build our fences and gates. But the truth is we stand on the same ground. There should be no border disputes! We are made in the image of God, part of creation and loved by him who calls us by name to tear down the fence that divides us one from another. Where is that fence for you?

Amen.