

“We Have the Key”

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19"There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. 20And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, 21who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. 22The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. 23In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. 24He called 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.' 25But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. 26Besides 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.' 27He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house-28for I have five brothers-that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.' 29Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.' 30He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' 31He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"

(Luke 16:19-31)

As many of his parables do, this story of Jesus describes a radical reversal. A rich man clothed in fine linen who feasted, “made merry,” and “lived in splendor” his entire life, and a poor man clothed in rags and sores who lived in hunger and pain for his entire life, find that, in the afterlife, they have essentially traded places. The poor man Lazarus is carried away by the angels to be comforted in heaven, while the rich man, who is never named, is sent to oblivion and torment in Hades. We are not explicitly told why, but the implication is that the rich man missed signs that he should have seen and failed to take actions that he should have taken. My guess is that Lazarus did occasionally get some scraps at the rich man’s gate, but we are left with the impression that the rich family should have done much more. An unjust and inequitable situation was allowed to persist for far too long.

Interestingly, Jesus does not recount what the rich man did or say what he should have done. He just makes it clear that it is too late for the rich man. The focus shifts to the rest of the rich man’s family – the people who still have a chance to rectify the imbalance and end the injustice. Across the chasm, the man begs father Abraham to send Lazarus as a heavenly messenger to his five living brothers. They will recognize the man who spent a lifetime at their brother’s gate, the tormented man thinks. Perhaps they will listen where he had not listened, see what he had not seen, and somehow avoid his sad fate.

My focus this morning is on Abraham’s response to this reasonable, even thoughtful request. In denying it, Abraham explains that those brothers already have what they need to make good decisions and do the right thing. *“They have Moses and the prophets,”* Abraham says, *“they should listen to them.”*



But the rich man in torment persists. “No, father Abraham,” he says, what they need is a sign. The need a miracle to jar them out of their complacency and help them see what is right in front of them. Abraham, however, knows that even a miraculous sign would not be enough. “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets,” he answers, “they won’t be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”

Those of us on this side of the grave would be wise to hear the message that this parable gives to us – a message of the things that we need to see and hear in the lives we are living. It is a message that God has already given us a roadmap for the way we should walk. We have the wisdom of the Genesis stories... we have the guidance of the covenant law that requires us to take care of the poor, the orphans, the widows, and the aliens in our midst... we have the passionate warnings of the prophets who remind us repeatedly to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God...¹ we have the gospels that show us the Way of faith, hope, and love... and we have the epistles that call us to lives of compassion, love, and service. In short, we have the Bible, the wisdom of the holy scriptures that have been passed on to us by the great cloud of witnesses that is the church in every generation. We do not have to wonder about what God asks of us – it is all right here.

The Christian tradition in which we stand -- the conviction of the Protestant Reformation expressed by Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Knox... up through preachers like Jonathan Edwards and Peter Marshall and William Sloane Coffin... to brilliant theologians like Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich – has always focused on this idea that the Bible contains everything we need to chart a path of faithful discipleship. One of the most powerful statements of this conviction can be found in one of the great confessional statements of our church, the Westminster Confession of Faith. Drafted in 1646 and adopted by the Church of Scotland in 1647, the Westminster Standards quickly became the preeminent statement of faith in the Reformed tradition. Its words were carried to New England on Puritan ships and to the Middle Atlantic colonies in the coats of the Scotch-Irish Presbyterians, helping to frame both the constitutional foundations of our nation and the faith of countless Christians in the New World.

The first chapter of this confession is devoted in full to our understanding of scripture, a fact that shows how central the Bible is and has always been to our understanding of the faith. Among the many lofty affirmations made in that first chapter is the assertion that “The whole counsel of God, concerning **all things necessary** for [God’s] own glory, [humanity’s] salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture.”²

It goes on to affirm that “All... **those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed**, for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.”³

In other words, we tend to agree with Abraham. The rich man’s brothers didn’t need a miracle. They already had the guidance they needed. Holy scripture had already told them that they could not ignore the poor people at their gates. It said clearly that they could not

¹ Micah 6:8.

² *Westminster Confession of Faith*, §6.006 (emphasis added).

³ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, §6.007 (emphasis added).

neglect the scared and defenseless orphan, the penniless widow, or the vulnerable alien seeking shelter in their country. They had all things necessary to be known and believed, and if they weren't going to take the Bible's wisdom to heart... if they refused to hear its teaching or learn its lessons... well, there is not much more that can be done, because, without basic biblical knowledge of who God is and who we are called to be, a sign isn't going to do much good – even a miraculous, dead-rising-from-the-grave kind of sign. Even if they did observe such a sign, its meaning would probably be missed. They might say to themselves, "Wow, that was really something," but they would probably just turn and go on their merry way, continuing to feast sumptuously and live their lives of splendor.

You see, knowing the right things is only the first step. We may study and learn all kinds of things, but that knowledge is not worth much if it does not inform the way we engage with the world. Knowledge and wisdom change the way we see reality, and open us to new possibilities that we would otherwise miss.

The day we packed up our house to move to Richmond, Virginia, was a pretty hectic one. You all know how much work and stress that is, packing up to move away. And that day, the physical stress was accompanied by a pretty good dose of emotional stress as well. I was excited about the move. I was convinced that this is what God wanted us to do. But we were giving up a lot to take this road, and that day those costs were more apparent than they had ever been before.

We pulled out of Wilmington late in the morning, the movers setting out right behind us with all of our stuff. Stephanie and I were in the front seat, and the girls were in the back in their car seats. Molly was 3, Kate was just three months old. We had a long drive ahead of us, and that allowed plenty of time for some worries that had nagged me for a while to grow and build. Rolling up I-95, somewhere in southern Virginia, they came into full bloom. I had just given up a lucrative career with good partners and good work. We had some savings but not much. Yesterday, the two little girls in the back seat had a daddy who was a lawyer. Today, they had a daddy who was an unemployed seminary student. And all the sudden, I really began to ask myself, "What have I done?"

It was at that moment -- that *exact* moment – when I happened to spot through misty eyes something up ahead on the side of the road. As I got nearer, I realized it was a man walking. And as I got even closer, I saw that it was a man carrying something on his back. And as I got even closer, I realized that it was a man... who was walking north... and on his shoulder... was a cross... a literal wooden cross -- ten feet high, painted white, with lawnmower wheels fixed to the bottom so that the base could roll without dragging the ground.

Under any circumstances, that would be noticeable. It is not every day that you see a man lugging a cross while walking on the shoulder of an interstate highway. Lots of people saw that man that day, and I bet many of them said "Wow, that was really something," and then kept right on driving to wherever it was they were going. But not me. Not on that day, in that moment, because you and I have Moses and the prophets, the gospels and the epistles, and I was trying my best to listen to them. That knowledge opened my eyes and allowed something to break through the clouds of my worry and panic. Yes, this may be difficult... yes, there will be costs... but I finally understood what Jesus was talking about when he said *"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up*

their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”⁴

Life throws us plenty of curveballs, and all of us struggle about the decisions we make. We want to be faithful, but it is not always easy to know what the faithful choices are. But we have to remember that we have been given an amazing gift – a tool that helps us to unlock life’s mysteries. In fact, we have the key – a fount of wisdom and guidance that, if we know it and trust it, can help us see the needs, opportunities, and blessings that we would otherwise miss, even when they are right there, every day, at our own gates.

Karl Barth, one of the most influential theologians of the 20th century, famously encouraged people to embrace this way of life. “Take your Bible and take your newspaper,” he said, “and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible.”

In other words, learn to look upon the world through the eyes of Moses and the prophets. Study the words of Jesus and acts of the apostles. Allow their experiences and their shared wisdom guide you on the paths of life. If we do, when we get to the end of that path God has laid out for us, we might just look back and say “Wow, that was really something!”

⁴ Mark 8:34-35.