

Victoria Linner

Proper 21, Track 2: Amos 6:1a, 4-7; Psalm 146; 1 Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31

The first time I saw the Pixar movie *Coco*, I left the movie theater disturbed. If you're not familiar with *Coco*, it's a beautiful movie set in Mexico on the Day of the Dead. It's about a young boy named Miguel who is accidentally transported to the Land of the Dead, in other words the afterlife. The afterlife that Miguel encounters is spectacular and colorful, but eventually Miguel learns that the afterlife operates in much the same way that our world operates now. Those who receive the most attention and resources in this life, receive the most attention and resources in the afterlife.

This was the major aspect of the story that I found so disturbing. I remember complaining to my mom, "There's no justice!" I didn't have the words for it then, but now after meditating on today's Gospel reading, I can see that perhaps I was looking for the reversal of fortune that's described in the story of Lazarus and the rich man.

The rich man, who ignored and neglected Lazarus, hears from Abraham, "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."

This inversion of experience echoes the blessings and woes Jesus shares in Luke chapter 6.

"Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.
"Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled."¹

¹ Luke 6: 20-21

“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.”²

As we can see, the reversal of hierarchies of domination and wealth is a recurring theme in Luke, and these statements point us to an understanding of what God’s love and justice look like. Yet, this story seems to paint a picture of punitive justice for the rich man, and a scary one at that. Some have interpreted this passage as evidence that the afterlife consists of two options: eternal torment or eternal bliss. One might even say the text is clear on this. The rich man *is* tormented in Hades and Abraham *does* tell him that there’s an uncrossable chasm between them.

But I don’t think this passage in Luke is trying to be a comprehensive systematic theology of the afterlife, and it’s especially not describing our modern-day notions of heaven and hell.

You may have noticed that Jesus says the rich man is in Hades. In Greek mythology, Hades is The Realm of the Dead. It’s the underworld where **everyone** goes when they die, just like the Land of the Dead in *Coco*. The rich man is not in hell while Lazarus and Abraham are in heaven. They’re all in hades, just different parts of hades.

So if the story isn’t about going to heaven or hell when you die, what are we supposed to take away from this story? That we should get right with God during this life, so we know which part of *Hades* we’re going to in the next life? And how can we square this story with what we heard a couple weeks ago about the shepherd searching high and low for the lost sheep? Or the

² Luke 6: 24-25

woman sweeping her entire house for one coin? Does Christ search for us until we're found or could there be an uncrossable chasm between us and God?

To start, the chasm is between the rich man and Abraham, not the rich man and God. And the conclusion of this story isn't about what happens in the afterlife at all. When the rich man begs Abraham to send Lazarus to his father's house to warn his brothers, so they don't also come to be tormented in hades,³ Abraham replies, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them."⁴

Maybe we don't need the threat of hell or eternal punishment in the afterlife to know what is right in God's sight and be motivated to enact it. Like the Pharisees, who are the audience of this story, we have Moses and the prophets. We have depictions of what God asks of us and what God's justice looks like.

For example, the prophet Isaiah lists what is acceptable to the Lord:

"to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the straps of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke
[...] to share your bread with the hungry
and bring the homeless poor into your house"⁵

The rich man is a religious man. He calls Abraham "father." He would have known this portion of Isaiah and the many other passages of the Hebrew Bible that rebuke his decision to feast sumptuously every day while ignoring the man starving at his gate.

³ Luke 16:28

⁴ Luke 16:29

⁵ Isaiah 58: 6-7

In this story Abraham says, ““If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’ ”⁶

I can’t help but notice that nowadays some of the loudest Christians, who presume to know all about what’s going to happen to them and everyone else in the afterlife, have no interest in enacting the justice described by Moses and the Prophets even after Jesus Christ himself rose from the dead.

So I ask again, what are we supposed to do with this story? How can we take seriously Christ’s warnings about the consequences of hoarding wealth and neglecting the poor while maintaining that God’s very nature is abundant love and overflowing mercy?

For now, we can emulate Miguel from *Coco*. We can strive for reconciliation by working in community to right the wrongs of the present and the past. We can prioritize caring for those who like Lazarus are hungry, unhoused, and physically sick.

And as for the afterlife? We can trust in God’s justice in this life and the next. I’ll conclude with the words of Feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether, who offers us one way to picture and understand God’s restorative justice in the context of Luke. She writes:

“The poor and oppressed experience themselves being restored to their humanity, entering a new age in which the rod of oppression is broken. Those who are privileged in the present age initially experience God’s liberation as wrath, as the breaking of their systems of privilege and the shattering of their ideologies of righteousness. Only after they accept the judgment of God on their state of unjust

⁶ Luke 16:31

privilege is it possible for them to join the liberated poor in the new age of God's peace and justice.”⁷

Friends, our assurance that the afterlife will be just should not lead us to abdicate our responsibilities in this life. Rather than worrying about the afterlife and how exactly we get there or what exactly it’s going to be like, we should focus on enacting God’s justice here and now.

Amen.

⁷ Ruether, Rosemary Radford. *Sexism and God Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*. New York, NY: Beacon Press, 1993, 179-180.