

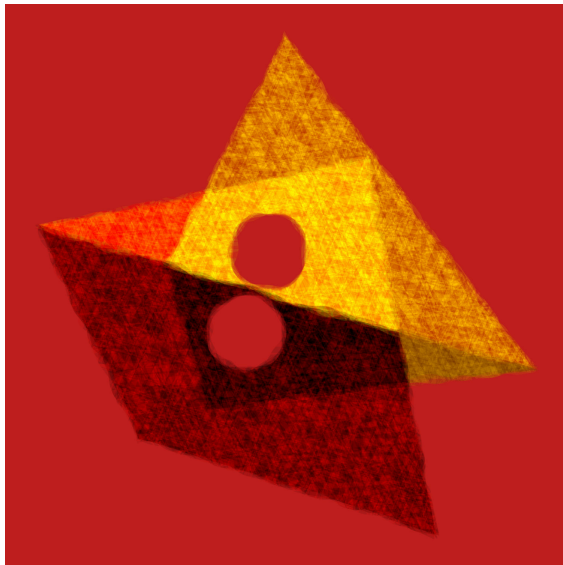
on restitution: Lazarus and the rich man

scripture reading: Luke 16:19-31

preacher: Robert Steiner

the story

19 "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. 20 At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores 21 and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. 22 "The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. 23 In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. 24 So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.' 25 "But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. 26 And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.' 27 "He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, 28 for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.' 29 "Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.' 30 "'No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' 31 "He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"



- *The Rich Man and Lazarus*, David Wojkowicz

remaining invisible

Lazarus is coming closer to our home in Observatory. He is not only there in the morning, but also spends the night in the same spot. Lazarus is also getting younger and is no longer just male. Lazarus has also become less communicative. He used to call, sometimes even shout and get up to draw attention. Now, when I pass him, he is either asleep or gazing right through me. He has made it easier to ignore him. But he is getting closer, moving up further on Station Road. And he is no longer alone. There is a Lazarus every 30 meters. Some regulars, others visitors. Unofficial figures indicate that close to 12,000 people are living on the streets of Cape Town.

How did Lazarus get there? Our Gospel story does not tell us. We can only guess. The Greek text does not give

him much agency. It says that he was laid at the gate of the rich man. He was either too old or too disabled to walk himself. But who laid him there? Family members, friends, or so-called friends? We have seen blind people being used and abused to illicit money at street corners. Extreme poverty creates desperate synergies and problematic symbioses. But in our story "the street person" does not remain anonymous. In some ways his name is all he has. It is Lazarus, which derives from the Hebrew name "Eleazar", "God has helped." A name given to him by his parents. It is filled with hope and promise. His birth was experienced as a divine gift to them. His name kept reminding him of God's gracious intervention. But how will God help now, that he is destitute, "covered with sores" and completely reliant on the help of others? The level of his despair is unsettling. He is not even expecting a handout from the rich man. What he is hoping is for is that something will fall from the rich man's table and that one of his servants, when swiping the floor, would be empathetic enough to not just throw it away but offer it to him. In some ways he has descended to the level of dogs, who live on what falls from their master's table or what is dumped at the side of the street. The only ones in the story showing compassion to Lazarus are the dogs. Their saliva was considered to have healing properties for human wounds. It is a heart wrenching scene. The Lazarus I know also has a dog, a loyal companion, though emaciated as his master.

Did the rich man not notice Lazarus? He is not given a name. Maybe because a man of such status and wealth, "dressed in purple and fine linen" is well known and does not need an introduction. But it might be a subtle literary device, encouraging me, the reader, to identify with him. I am asking myself again: Did the rich man not notice Lazarus? We don't know. Again the text leaves us guessing. There is a large gap, a long hyphen between the day Lazarus arrived at the gate and the day of his passing. It could have been weeks, months, or even years. Time can work in strange ways. The likelihood of intervention does not necessarily increase with time. To the contrary, with time tends to come acceptance and complacency. We get used to injustice. Our senses get easily dulled. And our mind has a way of rationalizing and justifying our non-response. Maybe this explains the rich man's attitude. It might not be indifference or a lack of compassion. And it might not be that he had no time and was simply too busy, but rather that he had too much time to keep delaying his response until it was no longer his responsibility.

endings matter

The story presents us with two endings. Jesus begins with telling a story that must have been well known to his audience. But then he creatively adds his own ending, which once again illustrates that with Jesus in every apparent ending dwells the promise of a new beginning. Nothing is set in stone. The Good News are that no one and nothing needs to stay the same. In a stroke of genius he brings the story back to earth and manages to bridge what seemed like an insurmountable chasm. The original folk story, possibly stemming from Egypt, ends with verses 25 and 26: "But Abraham, replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.'" The original ending must have been popular among those feeling left out and rejected by mainstream society. One day God would reverse the situation, things would be evened up, and they would be compensated for the present suffering. The sudden change of fate is already signaled by the way Lazarus is gently carried upwards by angels, while the rich man is going down, buried in the ground. In the world to come the "wretched of the earth" (Fanon) would be able to enjoy what is now withheld from them. And the rich in turn would finally experience what it is like to suffer. The last would be the first, and the first would be the last. Such feelings of retribution and revenge are understandable among those suffering daily humiliations and feeling completely disempowered by systemic violence. But how can such a reversal be considered a solution? It would simply be the opposite of what we have right now. It would be a victory of hatred and revenge and a mockery of justice. The story fantasizes about the rich suffering even greater and eternal torments. And where does this leave poor Lazarus, who is portrayed to enjoy Abraham's bosom in full view of the rich man's suffering. A rather sadistic scenario, far from what we believe the triumph of grace to look like. In the hands of the powerful, the religious and the political elite, the story's ending served to intimidate and pressurize both the rich and the poor. The rich would be able to earn their salvation by regular alms giving to the poor,

small acts of charity. The poor would be asked to carry their fate with patience, for one day they would be rewarded in heaven. But the ultimate result was the sanctioning of the unjust status quo. Justice was delayed to life after death and could only be envisioned as being punitive. Until then, the rich would remain rich, and the poor would remain poor. Charity would be able to soften the rough edges of such injustice and even serve as a ticket to heaven for the rich. And the poor would have to do with what Karl Marx called the "opium of the people". Such a vision of the end marks the end to justice both on earth and in heaven. It is rather sobering to think that for most of its existence the church marketed this as Good News.

But Jesus does not stop there. While everyone listening must have nodded in approval, he continues and finishes the story on a very different note. The rich man experiences a sudden surge of compassion. Even though he cannot escape his destiny, his concern is for his brothers. If only Lazarus could come back and speak to them. But Abraham remains adamant that his brothers have what they need to be responsible agents of their lives and fates, they have „Moses and the prophets“. That is really all one needs. No further revelation or miracle or visit from the dead will be able to improve the clarity and insight of what we would refer to as the Hebrew bible. What is needed is a new seriousness and openness to engage those writings that speak to us about creating and sustaining more humane and caring communities. All should have access to those resources that nurture life. They are given to us as a gift from God, to be shared equally. What we have, has been entrusted to us, to further life for all and to build communities where everyone's dignity is affirmed and protected. There is no excuse. We have what we need. And by directing us back to „Moses and the prophets“ Jesus grounds us once again in this reality, in this life, on this earth, so that Lazarus will experience the comfort of Abraham's bosom in the here and now.

understanding restitution

This interpretation resonates with TS Maluleke's attempt to restore Lazarus before not after he dies. In his article „Justice in post-apartheid South Africa: Towards a Theology of Restitution“ (2008) one of South Africa most prolific black theologians attempts to move us beyond the past metaphors of liberation, reconstruction and reconciliation towards fully embracing the challenges of restitution. While reconciliation might be more pleasing to the ears of the privileged, it is perceived to have been „grossly misunderstood, misappropriated and softened.“ His assessment is hard hitting: For all too long reconciliation was perceived to be the work the powerless and wronged victims had to do for the powerful perpetrators and beneficiaries. We have witnessed it ourselves in this sanctuary, that especially young black academics are tired of carrying white people's guilt. Restitution, by contrast, proves to be „more rough, more divisive and less amenable to taming and down-toning.“ And especially a theological understanding of the process of restitution promises to assist us in overcoming some of its hurdles and difficulties. The following aspects of Maluleke's theological understanding of restitution strike me as particularly pertinent and worth of further reflection and discussion. I have selected those I felt were in particular insightful, and have listed them as questions, rather than statements. For it seems to me that in response to Maluleke's paper the danger for us is to move too quickly to finding answers. Meanwhile the process of restitution calls us first of all to identify and name the real questions. This will play into the strengths of a theological approach as highlighted by Maluleke. Each point is followed by comments that do not necessarily reflect Maluleke's own argument. But I hope that they are shared in the same spirit and provide food for more exploration:

(1) How can we nurture a theology that remains honest and sincere about the constant gap between the ideal and the actual? It reminds me of what the German liberation theologian Doroethee Soelle described as the tension between the mystical „already now“ and the prophetic „not yet“. Along the lines of 1 John 3:2, where it says: "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known."

(2) How can we avoid platitudes and especially be suspicious of Christian platitudes? It involves a careful navigation between the scylla of religious legalism and the charybdis of cheap grace.

(3) How can we make sure that restitution involves the restoration of just relations in all areas of our lives, in our relationship to God, to each other, and to nature? It was Steve de Gruchy and his olive theology that reminded us about having both the „brown“ and the „green“ agenda on our radar.

(4) What does it mean that God is "the author and grand architect and driver of restitution"? If this is the case, then we are not left to our own devices to bring about such transformation. Without God this would be an impossible and unbearable task. It encourages us to re-visit important theological loci in relation to the theme of restitution and to possibly begin to speak about salvation as a form of restitution. We will probably discover that restitution takes us into the very heart of the Gospel. It is a powerful metaphor and lens to understand how interconnected the present socio-political, economical, and environmental crisis is. In all of this it is important to remember that theologically all our actions and endeavors are but a response to God's first Word and action. God calls and we respond. It already begins in Genesis chapter 1, which provides us with a liturgy of call and response. We never stop responding to God's creative acts of grace and beauty and love. Someone has started the process, all we need to do is to participate and to see our participation as a response made in joy and gratitude. Restitution is not about avoiding the fate of the rich man and to earn enough points to make it into Abraham's bosom. The starting point is God's unreserved declaration of love, God's bold and trusting „yes“ to a humanity created in God's own image. In the words of Richard Rohr: „God loves us not if we change, but God loves us so that we can change.“ To hold on to this gift of love will help us to shift our modus operandi from being guilt and fear driven to being sourced in genuine love and care, in a desire to bring life to this planets and all its inhabitants, to reach out for a life no longer lived at the expense of other lives. It will protect us from forms of religious and political activism that are merciless and fanatical.

Incidentally, South Africa's peaceful transition from Apartheid to its first democracy has often been hailed as a miracle. Such rhetoric might again be one of those dangerous Christian platitudes which hide the sacrifice and hard work involved from those oppressed and disempowered to bring about such a peaceful transition. What if this was, politically speaking, the first word and action that marked the creation of a new future, the call that is still waiting for a clear and bold response from those still living with enormous privileges.

(5) And finally, will we assume responsibility for our past? Maluleke is correct to suggest that „while we may not have caused each and every individual injury, we may have indirectly occasioned it, permitted it, not acted against it or benefited from it.“ It is one thing to not feel guilty and it is another to have no conscience at all. The word responsibility refers to our ability and willingness to respond and explore our own role in the unfolding of a new future which will always have to be informed by what happened in the past. It is also in this respect that only the truth will be able to truly set us free - not from each other, but for each other.

In order to get a better grasp of what acts of restitution involve, it is important to distinguish it from charity. Maluleke makes the following observations: While charity often only addresses the symptoms, restitution looks at the root causes of injustice and inequality. While charity tends to be only pragmatic, restitution also addresses the ideological baggage and takes into account the broader societal debates. While charity is often centered around the satisfaction of the giver, restitution focuses on the needs and the perceptions of the one who receives. While charity is often driven by short-term guilt, restitution hopes to be informed by a more sustainable philosophical or theological theory. All of this is not said to undermine acts of charity, for those small acts of care can inspire proper restitution. But charity cannot replace the hard work of restitution. And genuine transformation is not the result of charity, but only of restitution.

on seeing Lazarus

In closing I would like to come back to the story of Lazarus and the rich man. Maluleke himself draws on the story to make very concrete suggestions regarding the process of restitution. In taking this biblical story as an illustration, the big concept of restitution is beautifully translated into our everyday interaction with people at the

margins - in this particular case with people living on the streets. I have once again turned his points into questions that will hopefully stimulate further discussions. And while Maluleke himself does not give Jesus credit for a second, more transformative and hopeful ending, his own reading and argument very much echoes the conviction that we have what we need to truly see Lazarus and save him before he dies.

(1) Do we see him? Indeed, Lazarus is difficult to see. Maluleke is right to say that „we go out of the way to explain away, misrepresent and criminalize the anger of our Lazaruses.“

(2) Do we bank on his patience and discipline? For Maluleke, the real miracle of the story is that Lazarus hasn't moved. There is an urgency! For Lazarus has very little to lose. Patience might be the last and only thing he has to lose

(3) Do we know what keeps him at the gate? So often we are completely unaware and oblivious to the linkages between poverty and wealth that rob Lazarus' agency.

(4) Do we listen to him? Maluleke is right to point out that Lazarus was not born at the gates of the rich man's homestead. Lazarus has a story to tell. He knows how he ended up there. He will probably also know what it takes for him to be restored. We have to stop speaking for Lazarus or at Lazarus.

(5) Do we recognize his initiative and his limitations? Yes, Lazarus has taken initiative. Or his friends have. We also often miss that. His initiative calls for our response. And his limitations call for the community to come on board and offer the kind of skills he does not have. We all depend on this kind of supportive network. None of us can save themselves.

(6) Do we wait until hereafter? We have everything we need, „Moses and the prophets“.

restitution in action

There is an organization in Cape Town, based in Claremont, which shows us how restitution can work within the context of working with people living on the streets. The charitable gift vouchers offer a wonderful point of entry for those coming to their premises and might very well mark the beginning of a journey of restitution. This voucher form is available online on U-Turn's website, ready to be posted to us: <http://homeless.org.za/vouchers>. The following graphic of „the journey of a U-turn voucher“ exemplifies the promise of genuine restitution.

There is hope for Lazarus to be restored before not after he dies.

