

Send Lazarus: Luke 16: 19-31

by [J. Mary Luti](#) in the [September 9, 1998](#) issue

The deacons of a well-off parish announced that they would give grocery vouchers to strangers who dropped by the church office. The vouchers could be used for food, but were "not valid for alcohol, lottery tickets or tobacco." The congregation was thrilled. Cash handouts were making them uncomfortable. No one wanted to see his greenbacks plunked down at a liquor store; no one wanted to be an enabler. But no one wanted to refuse assistance either, and here was a way to help that really *helped*. Feeling peevish one day, I asked what a deacon would do if a stranger didn't want groceries but was instead itching to rent *The Sound of Music*, or tour the city on an air-conditioned bus. What if a guy asks for three bucks for carnations to brighten the corner where he lives--maybe stick 'em in a gin bottle some other church had "enabled" him to buy? The conversation went downhill fast.

My fault; there was no need to be flip. The deacons were trying to be prudent. Besides, pastors tell me that needy strangers who drop by their offices rarely indicate a hankering for video rental or sightseeing, and they aren't into home decorating. They want money. Odds are they'll guzzle or gamble whatever they get. So, if vouchers nudge even one of them toward leafy green vegetables (and even if the rest scalp those vouchers and head straight to Louie's), the congregation should feel good about its ministry.

It's bad stewardship to waste cash on con artists; it's worse to harm people by supporting addictions--or, now that I think of it, by omitting red meat from that list of exclusions. The deacons acted with good intentions. And optimistically. It was the thing to do. I can't help feeling, however, that it was unseemly to be so darned tickled about it. Privileged people (and I don't mean just the well-to-do) should resist slipping into the habit of self-congratulation. Whenever wherewithal shapes the moral terrain and chooses the terms of compassion toward the "less fortunate," we might at least have the good sense to be a little embarrassed--do what we think is best, but do it kneeling.

Lazarus was one beggar who really could have used a voucher. He was starving, lusting after Dives's garbage. Now, Luke's parable lacks the sort of data that people

like to have when deciding whether and how to help. It doesn't say, for example, if Lazarus was deserving or lazy, drug-addicted, mentally ill, or a good Joe down on his luck. We don't know whether he cornered Dives with pathetic spiels every time he left the house, or whether he just lay there, annoyingly mute, day after day. All we know is that he was at the gate, sick and hungry. And that, Luke seems to say, is all we need to know to predict the reversal ahead.

Not too many details about Dives, either. Did he invite friends over to laugh and point, have his goons lean on Lazarus to scare him off, gag at the sight of the dogs licking his sores? We don't know whether he was a cold man with habitually averted eyes who never saw the beggar at all or whether he did notice, maybe said a prayer for a sorry case, but stuck to his policy of never giving anything directly to street people. We know only that he was rich, dressed well, ate sumptuously. And that, Luke seems to say, is all we need to know to predict the reversal ahead.

Anyone who reads the Gospels half-awake is not shocked by that reversal: Jesus is unnervingly repetitious about the mortal risks the wealthy run. Finally, in Luke 18, the disciples complain, "But [if what you say is true], how can the rich be saved?" There's something else in the Lazarus story that seems odd, however: Dives, up to his neck in flames, hasn't figured out that the reversal is for real and for good. There is no way out, even for him.

Of course, it's not lost on him that he's suffering, nor that his fortune and his fine Egyptian underwear have, literally, been shot to hell. Surely he's sorry now that he's failed to do right by that beggar. But even unspeakable retribution has not undone the self-beguilement that makes it easy to sin. His wherewithal is gone, but its stubborn residue remains: unconscious entitlement, reflex self-assertion and (ridiculous in the circumstances) a blithe optimism. Privilege clings to Dives, even in hell.

"Send Lazarus to help me," he pleads. It is not an idle line. It betrays habits of control. Dives still believes, remarkably, that he can command and expect a response. His obdurate assumptions about what's best and who deserves what have made him insensible to his situation. He continues to locate himself and others in the old geography of earned or innate worth. Lazarus is a man he should have helped, but it still wouldn't be wise to give him cash.

Lazarus is at best a servant. You can send for him with a curt command to refresh a damned but nonetheless important person who, because he is who he is, ought not to suffer, even now, the unrelenting thirst of the unsuccored poor. You can send him off to warn heedless brothers about the fate they're courting. It's never too late (God wouldn't be so cruel)--a wink of the eye, an exception for folks in the network . . .

But Abraham smashes this illusion; his reply is terrible and true: Some outcomes cannot be influenced. Some chasms cannot be crossed. Some things harden. There is a point of no return. Even Abraham cuts no ice with a God determined to be just.

How, then, can we privileged be saved? Luke has nothing new to say. We have Moses and the prophets and the Spirit to fix our hearts and minds on Jesus, who lives. We could listen to them.