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FIDDLER ON THE ROOF is high on my list of all-time favorites.

Through the eyes of TEVYE and his family we watch life unfold in the village of Anatevka during a time of great change.

The scene I've been thinking about this week is DREAM SEQUENCE. Remember?

After another long day of eking out a living, TEVYE and wife GOLDA are finally in bed, but TEVYE can't sleep because of what's happening with their eldest daughter TZEITEL.

You see, YENTE the matchmaker has told them she's found a husband for TZEITEL—the old widower LAZAR WOLF—and she sends TEVYE off to settle the details.

After some initial confusion, Tevye gives his consent for Lazar to marry Tzeitel.

But there's only one problem—TZEITEL has no desire to marry the old butcher!

Her mind is set on marrying the young man who's been a friend and companion since childhood—MOTEL.

And during a heart to heart with her father, she manages to get him to change his mind.

Tevye's wife, Golde, knows nothing about this change of course, so Tevye has to figure out not only how to BREAK THE NEWS to her, but to CONVINCE HER it's the RIGHT OUTCOME.

And as Tevye lies there in bed, mulling all this over, the idea hits him…

…only a word from BEYOND THE GRAVE could wield the power necessary to change Golde's mind.

So Tevye concocts a DREAM—actually, it's more of a NIGHTMARE—whose cast of characters includes Golde's long dead grandmother Tzeitel and Lazar Wolf's deceased but still jealous wife Fruma-Sarah.

Waking Golde up in feigned terror, Tevye recounts this made-to-order dream, and against all odds it works!

Lazar is OUT, Motel is IN, Tzeitel is HAPPY, and life goes on.

Words spoken from BEYOND THE GRAVE possess a GRAVITAS like no others.

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And in today's gospel we hear a tale from beyond the grave that flips the script on how the world works, the Parable of the Rich Man and poor Lazarus.

The notion of the GREAT REVERSAL is a frequent one in the gospels,
and we find it early in Luke, introduced by young Mary, who praises the God who…
"evicts the powerful from their thrones and lifts up the lowly;
who fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich away empty." [1]

From the get-go, Luke frames his story of Jesus by pointing out the economic inequities that exist in the Imperial economy.

Citing the research of historians Walter Scheidle and Steven Friesen,
Bible scholar Ched Myers notes that, in the heyday of the Roman Empire,
1½ % of the empire's inhabitants controlled 20% of the wealth.

Fast forward to our current decade and the Federal Reserve reports that
- **the top 1% of the US households own 38½% of the country's wealth**
- **and the top 10% control nearly 70% of our nation's wealth.[2]**

What does this mean? It means that the fixed economic gulf at the center of the parable is a very contemporary reality.

On one side of the gulf is the Rich Man, who's got all the BLING and the PRIVILEDGE money can buy.

On the other side is Lazarus, who at the absolute bottom of the social pyramid; whose body betrays how truly destitute he is.

The first surprise comes in verse 22, when, after death Lazarus is carried to Abraham's bosom, while the Rich Man finds himself in the place of the dead, the place the Greeks called HADES.

Yet, even in Hades the Rich Man can't let go of his lost entitlement!

Screaming across the gulf to insist on his own way, he pleads:
SEND LAZARUS TO DIP HIS FINGER IN WATER AND COOL MY TONGUE!

But Abraham points to the great chasm separating them that none can breach.

[1] Luke 1:46f.
[2] Ched Myers, quoted in *Healing Affluenza and Resisting Plutocracy: Luke's Jesus and Sabbath Economics.* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2025) p. 164

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I BEG YOU, cries the Rich Man, AT LEAST SEND LAZARUS TO MY FATHER'S HOUSE TO WARN MY BROTHERS!

THEY HAVE THE TORAH, THEY HAVE THE PROPHETS, Abraham replies, THEY SHOULD LISTEN TO THEM.

NO! Cries the Rich Man, unable to grasp the truth of his condition. BUT IF SOMEONE GOES TO THEM FROM THE DEAD—THEY WILL LISTEN!

And then, the final indictment: IF THEY DO NOT LISTEN TO MOSES AND THE PROPHETS, says Abraham, NEITHER WILL THEY BE CONVINCED EVEN IF SOMEONE RISES FROM THE DEAD.

There's a photograph that's been circulating on the internet in recent days, [image 1] a historic photograph of a Black man whose bare back is a lattice work of keloid scars—scars he received from repeated whippings from White overseers.[3]

Some say his name is PETER others GORDON; but he might as well be LAZARUS.[4]

The photo was taken in 1863 after he escaped from a Louisiana plantation and, having reached Union Army lines, enlisted in the Army.

During his medical examination, two itinerant photographers who were in camp at the time asked him to pose for a picture that would reveal the harsh treatment he'd received under slavery.

The image was widely circulated as a photographic card [image 2] and published in Harper's Weekly in July 1863 under the title "THE SCOURGED BACK."

The imagery, as journalist René Syler points out, is powerful, and forced the country to confront the horrors of slavery. [image 1 split screen]

"Gazing at this photo, people could no longer think of slavery as a benign institution. It was a dark and brutal time that must be remembered in all of its ugliness," writes Syler.[5]

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[3] I first learned about Gordon's story from a Facebook post by René Syler. Additional background on the photo can be found in an article by Frant H. Goodyear, III, on the America's Black Holocaust Museum website: https://www.abhmuseum.org/the-scourged-back-how-runaway-slave-and-soldier-private-gordon-changed-history/. Documentation of the Trump Administration's attempts to erase portions of America's history that Trump finds offensive can be found here: https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/park-service-ordered-to-take-down-some-materials-on-slavery-and-tribes/

[4] Silkenat, D 2014, '"A Typical Negro": Gordon, Peter, Vincent Colyer, and the story behind slavery's most famous photograph', *American Nineteenth Century History*, vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 169-186. https://doi.org/10.1080/14664658.2014.939807

[5] René Syler.

But not everyone wants us to SEE such a photograph or to remember the legacy of America's institutional caste system it conveys.

The Trump administration has ordered several National Park Service sites, including the Fort Pulaski National Monument in Georgia, to take down materials related to slavery and Native Americans—including THIS PHOTO, one of the most powerful images of the Civil War era.[6]

The President did so in an executive order last March because he does not want to show items that "inappropriately disparage Americans."[7]
(By which he must mean White Americans.) [end image]

Actions like this, attempts to sanitize the shadow side of American history, not only mask the truth, the BALD SENSE OF ENTITLEMENT behind such actions sets our nation's feet onto the path of self-destruction.

"To remove Gordon's image is not just erasure," writes Syler, "it's betrayal."

Friends, I ASK YOU— WHY SUCH FEAR OF THE TRUTH?!

Worship today began with CONFESSION.

We who follow Jesus know the truth of our lives is not hidden from him.

We who follow Jesus know we must be honest about the sins we've committed, individually and collectively—the things we've done and the things we've left undone.

We who follow Jesus don't turn away from the truth of our condition.

We confess our culpability; we seek forgiveness; and we pray for the strength to do an about face—so that the way we live now conforms to the Way of Jesus, our Lord and Savior.

Attempts to erase the ugly truths of our lives,
- to ignore Lazarus at our gate,
  - to expunge the baked-in inequities that have shaped our country,
    - and to erect in their stead a mythical image that confirms our pureness, our sinlessness, our entitlement—that, my friends, is **IDOLATRY**.

[6] From an article by Maxine Joselow in *The New York Times*. Printed in the September 15, 2025, edition of *The Seattle Times*. *Park service is ordered to take down some materials on slavery and tribes | The Seattle Times*.
[7] Ibid.

And such an IDOLATRY is under construction right now in our nation.

The denial of historical truths in order to satisfy an appetite for a history different than what we actually have is not a path toward "greatness" but a path toward oblivion.

"There are only two kinds of people in the end," wrote C. S. Lewis.
"Those who say to God, THY WILL BE DONE,
and those to whom God says, in the end, THY WILL BE DONE."[8]

David Brooks, quoting theologian Paul Tillich, suggests that the route to true character building, to wholeness, goes through suffering.

If this sounds familiar, that's because it's the whole testimony of the New Testament about Jesus. The route to wholeness and healing goes through suffering.

"Suffering," he writes, "introduces you to yourself and reminds you that you're not the person you thought you were. It carves through the floor of what you thought was the basement of your soul and it reveals a cavity. Then it carves through that and reveals a cavity. And then carves through that floor and reveals a cavity below."

"Moments of suffering reveal the deepness of a person the way nothing else does. And then…you realize, the only thing that can fuel that depth is spiritual food—not material [food]."[9]

The Rich Man's story is the story of one who sought to satisfy his appetite through material things. Insulated by his excesses he knew no suffering.

Therefore, he never confronted the chasm within his own soul; a chasm that blinded him to the needs of Lazarus at his gate.

When he awoke after death and found himself on the losing side of the ledger, even then he made demands, seeking to manipulate the situation to his advantage.

In response to the Rich Man's final plea, that Lazarus be sent to warn his brothers, Abraham answers:

> **IF THEY DO NOT LISTEN TO MOSES AND THE PROPHETS, NEITHER WILL THEY BE CONVINCED EVEN IF SOMEONE RISES FROM THE DEAD.**

[8] C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce.*
[9] Opinion | The Moral Bucket List - The New York Times

These final words are a warning shot across the bow of all the entitlements we hold so dear; entitlements that prevent us from seeing ourselves in need of what Christ, he who "emptied himself," offers—which is nothing less that liberation from all that binds us.

In the end, the final question comes down to this: In what, in whom, will we place our trust?

In a false narrative that ignores, sidesteps, betrays, or whitewashes the stories of the suffering?

Or in the God revealed in the Crucified and Risen Jesus—the God who says, BEHOLD! I MAKE ALL THINGS NEW!