

Gatekeeper or Gate Breacher? You Decide.

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[0:00] So let me ask you all a question. Will you be a gatekeeper or a gate breacher?! A warm orange light emanated in the darkness, bouncing through the room as it caught the brightest point on a small figure frozen in time.

! The light revealed a small red-haired little white boy standing almost entranced, fixed on the growing light.

Growing light. Growing light? Fire! Fire! The room was slowly increasing in brightness as the child and everyone else in the room in the home were growing closer and closer to an imminent doom. As the fire began, it ascent up the thick drapes hanging in the bedroom. And just as disaster seemed all but assured, the drapes were snatched, thrown down, and quenched in an instant. A miracle? A ghost? An angel? The boy's eyes scanned the room in shock and awe and fear and reverence.

[1:27] He turned his gaze to find a beautiful black woman. Decisive. Caring. And with a face that looked ready to sternly call him by his first, middle, and last name.

I know some of y'all know what I'm talking about. This would be the second time this young white child, Rufus, met this black woman, Dana.

Each time showing up in the nick of time to save his life. And it wouldn't be the last. In Octavia Butler's novel, Kindred, we follow the story of Dana as she is sent back in time and across the country from 1976 California to 1800s Maryland.

Each time at the brink of disaster as Rufus continually places himself into these life-threatening situations. Rufus, the heir and slaver of an antebellum plantation, and Dana, writer and his distant relative, find their stories fatally entangled.

Dana's existence in the modern day depends on Rufus's existence in the past. How that past unfolds is largely up to Rufus and his relationship with the empire of enslavement and degradation of my people.

[2:58] Will he see the humanity in the people that he cares for the most and those who are keeping him alive and sustaining his lifestyle? Will he rebel and build a future of freedom for these people?

Or will he choose to serve empire, dehumanization, and white supremacy? Will he be a gatekeeper or a gatebreacher?

Good morning, Table Church. If you don't know me, my name is Trevor Wendt. I'm one of the members of the preaching team here. And we are in the middle of a series called Dangerous Imaginations, Parables in Afrofuturism.

Where we're asking the question, okay, now that you have survived the wilderness and opened your hands, what do you dare to imagine? So I'm leading off the second movement of this series and asking us to uncover what blocks our imaginations.

So this morning, I'll be walking through the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16, 19 to explore this idea. You can head over to the table.center to keep up or table.center.

[4:13] Don't put the before it. You won't get there. But table.center to keep up with the scripture. And note, there will not be sermon notes for the next two weeks because part of our staff here, the part of the church staff is out on vacation because rest over performance is a crucial value here at the table church.

Yeah, I can clap for that. So let me pray and we can dive into this passage for today. Jesus, I thank you for the opportunity to gather together as your body, as people.

God, I ask that you would guide my words, that you, Holy Spirit, would give me the words to say, shut my mouth at the things that you don't want me to say. And help us to broaden our imagination,

expand our minds, and reflect you more each and every day.

Amen. There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at the gate, or at his gate, lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table.

Even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried.

[5:42] In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He 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. But 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. Besides 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. He said, Then, Father, I beg you to send him to my father's house. For I have five brothers, that he may warn them so that they will not also come to this place of torment.

Abraham replied, They have Moses and the prophets. They should listen to them. He said, No, Father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.

[6:51] He said, If they do not listen, or he 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.

Afrofuturism is a communal imaginative movement, crafting a vision of a liberated future for black people. It reflects on the greatest overarching narrative of scripture, which is to redeem the chaos. So with this lens, and specifically how Octavia Butler applies it in her novel, Kindred, will explore this parable and ask the question, Will you be a gatekeeper or a gate breacher?

I'm going to say that like 1,511 million times today. So if you've got some notes, that might be something to write now. What I mean by this is, Will you actively or passively uphold or maintain a status quo of exclusion?

Or will you breach the gates? Will you embody a radical inclusion of the marginalized, of the oppressed, of the disinherited, and dream of a reality of radical inclusion, of equity and equality?

[8:07] This parable that's attributed to Jesus tells the fictional tale of a rich man and a man named Lazarus. Now this isn't the Lazarus that you might think of, the brother of Mary and Martha that we learn about in the Gospel of John.

But this is a character by the same name. And in this narrative, we're told of a rich man who feasts every single day, comes through drip and drip, drip with purple.

And this is a color that we learn through the sort of context and theology that's set apart only for royalty and gods at this time. And he's coming through with fine linen.

Both of these are communicating that the rich man, as theologian Francois Bovan puts it, is scandalously rich. Simultaneously, we learn of another man who is contrastingly poor and downtrodden and covered in sores.

And he's named Lazarus. His unfortunate state is emphasized by even the dogs who were seen as a negative, unclean animal in this culture and in this time are licking his sores.

[9:24] And Lazarus is posted up outside of the rich man's gates and he's hungry. And he's hoping that one day he'll be granted just the scraps that fall from this rich man's table.

But the parable seems to communicate that this never happens. He's simply ignored by the rich man and suffers while he encloses himself in this compound of his luxury and his self-interest. And every day he's hungry.

Kindred as well. As Rufus and his family of oppressors create barriers of slavery and brutalization between them and the people they're enslaving.

Dana, Nigel, Carrie, Luke, even the woman that he loves, Alice, to name a few of them. Then one day the rich man and Lazarus both die.

[10:48] And they go to this sort of idea of a Jewish holding place, a purgatory type situation, to await the final judgment. Now I'm not going to get into the afterlife theology of all of this, but just know that biblical scholars essentially agree that this concept that's presented here is neither a heaven or a hell.

Nevertheless, they both end up in this in-between location in this spot at the same time. And Lazarus is called or carried off by the angels into Abraham's bosom, which is the name of a place. And the rich man is carried off into or goes into Hades into these flames of agony. And so they're posted up in their respective spots.

And the rich man is struggling while Lazarus is posted up chilling with Abraham. And the rich man sees Lazarus and Abraham far off. And he's yelling, hey, hey, Father Abraham.

It's hot. It's stuffy. There ain't no AC here. I'm thirsty. These flames are hurting like a mug. I'm struggling. Can you get Lazarus to dip his finger in some water and drop me just a little bit of it to quench my thirst?

[12 : 03] And Abraham looks back and says, my child. You got all your good stuff on earth. Lazarus got evil stuff on earth. So now he's comforted and you're in agony.

The rich man sees Lazarus and Abraham and he calls to Abraham to try to force Lazarus into pity or generosity that he never showed him.

He doesn't speak to Lazarus at all, but he speaks to Abraham. And he continues to ignore and give no sense of dignity to Lazarus.

Furthermore, notice that he calls Abraham, Father Abraham. Both of these men are Jews. They are of the same people.

And the rich man still chooses to ignore his Jewish brother. Notice that the rich man knows exactly who Lazarus is.

[13 : 07] He knows him by name. And yet his imagination is limited to what Lazarus can do for him. Rich man asks, yo, can you raise Lazarus from the dead to warn my brothers?

He's still focused on himself. He doesn't even see him as a person. He sees him as a tool. He's still focused on taking care of his own and his own alone.

Exclusion is still all that he's thinking about even after death. Rufus and Kindred is the same. His imagination stops at what black folks he's oppressing can do for him.

What Dana can do for him. To serve his interests, his desires. Using her future knowledge to do stuff like give him aspirin or teach him how to read or heal his sicknesses that he almost dies from. Multiple occasions. She and they are all tools for him to utilize, not peers, to value his equals. But Abraham looks at the rich man and says, well, they should listen to Moses and the prophets.

[14 : 20] Rich man says, well, a resurrected man would be better. Abraham says, well, if they ain't finna listen to Moses and the prophets, they ain't finna listen to nobody. Even if they rise from the dead.

Will you be a gatekeeper or a gate breacher? The rich man through the end of the narrative remained a gatekeeper. Even in asking for mercy, he was focused selfishly on himself, on his brothers.

Not even once addressing Lazarus, but attempting to use the power of the patriarch of his faith to coerce the once marginalized person to serve him.

The rich man couldn't imagine a reality where Lazarus was someone he could give food scraps to. Much less someone welcomed at his table. Or could even speak to.

He chose exclusion. And just like the rich man and kindred, Rufus couldn't imagine a future where neither black folks were considered equal and free from slavery, nor a future apart from white supremacy and violence and domination that he was raised in.

[15 : 33] Even when he interacted with someone from the future, Dana, who told him of a different reality upon the horizon. He chooses exclusion. There's this really powerful scene in the book where Dana has come back after this moment where she was transported back to the future and left her partner, Kevin, behind.

Kevin's a white dude. And so time is just inconsistent between these two time periods. So Dana was gone for like eight days. She comes back and Kevin's been in this spot for five years.

Five years stuck in antebellum slavery, right? And Rufus was supposed to send this letter to Kevin to let him know that Dana has come back, right?

So he can come get her, get her out of the situation in the South. And Rufus doesn't do it. So once once once Kevin finally shows up because his father ended up sending this letter to stand by his word.

Kevin and Dana trying to get out of this spot because who trying to be in the South in slavery as an interracial couple? Like, come on. And so Rufus, as you can imagine, is tripping.

[16:59] They hit the road. They see Rufus. Rufus pulls out the toaster, the gap, the rifle. And he's threatening their lives and saying, no, you ain't going to go nowhere.

He comes back and he comes after her, right? And he and he says to Dana. You're not leaving me. Damn you. You're not leaving me.

See, Dana can't ever leave this past unless her life is threatened, unless she's not even just threatened, but she is in a situation where she could literally die, where she's on the brink of death. There's moments where she's beaten to near death. There's moments where she loses an arm. The book starts like that. It takes these life-threatening situations for her to go back.

And so it takes this moment where Rufus is willing to kill her and shoots at her for her to return to her modern-day California.

[18:09] That entire time, Rufus still sees her as property and chooses exclusion. Now, that wasn't the last time that Dana ends up back in the past.

And still then, we see her as a gate breacher. We see her as someone traveling across this gate of time over and over again, imaging Christ time after time after time, because she believes in a future where the rich man and Rufus can be made whole.

Where he realizes that the walls and the gates that he's upholding is actually a prison for both him and the enslaved black folks who are within it.

Dana believes in a future where Rufus can be made whole. Dana believes in a future where Rufus can be a different man, a better man, an abolitionist, and create a more equal future. But Rufus refuses.

And even though it seems impossible, she works towards it anyway. But there's one more gate breacher that we have to recognize from this parable.

[19:24] I told you at the top of this joint that this wasn't the same Lazarus that you're familiar with, who is the brother of Mary and Martha. So who is this cat?

If you look into the Hebrew meaning of the name Lazarus, you'll find that it means God helps. It seems to me that Lazarus is a symbol.

A symbol of the disinherited, the marginalized, of the oppressed, of the forgotten. And that Jesus is the fulfillment of who the rich man should be.

That his father's house isn't just for he and his brother's exclusive feasts, but it is for the downtrodden and the forgotten and the disinherited and the sick and the marginalized.

Luke seems to signal us towards the truth that Jesus is the gate breacher of all gate breachers.

That his gate is open. That there is no sickness.

[20:24] There is no marginalization. No oppression. No disability. There is no skin color. No pain that will keep you from his table. You are welcomed.

You are accepted. You are chosen. You are loved. You are his family. No matter what you've gone through in this life, there is already a seat for you at his table.

Where you will neither hunger nor thirst. This is the gospel. That no length, no width, no height, no death, no thing present, no thing to come that can separate us from the love of God.

The gate has been breached and you are welcome at his table. So how do we respond?

We see this radical inclusion of Jesus. How do we image Christ in our own lives? How do we notice Lazarus's around us and give them more than scraps?

[21:34] But give them a seat at the table. Will you be a gatekeeper or a gate breacher? Notice that in this parable, it's calling out the rich man for ignoring someone in his own circle of influence.

His own community. A cat who sits outside of his gates, of his home, every single day. He sees him. He knows him by name. It's like Jesus is calling us to look into our own neighborhoods. Our own families. Our own workplaces. Our third spaces.

Our city. And ask the question, who is the Lazarus? Who among the marginalized am I ignoring in my own sphere of influence? Will I be a gatekeeper or a gate breacher?

See, gatekeeping doesn't always show up as insidious as enslavement or overlooking the hungry person in your neighborhood.

[22:40] It can show up in many forms. With Afrofuturism and Octavia Butler's kindred as our lenses, we can peer into our context here in the U.S. And we know that the United States has been founded upon white supremacy and anti-blackness.

And most of the oppression experienced by the marginalized in this country is due to white supremacy. And in a church context that emphasizes in its mission a pursuit of anti-racism, we have

to both understand what that is and act upon it.

Author Ibram Kendi defines anti-racism in his book, *How to Be an Anti-Racist*. The opposite of racist isn't not racist. It is anti-racist.

What's the difference? One endorses either the idea of a racial hierarchy as a racist or racial equality as an anti-racist. One either believes problems are rooted in groups of people as a racist or locates the roots of the problems in power and policies as an anti-racist.

One either allows racial inequities to persevere as a racist or confronts racial inequities as an anti-racist. There is no in-between safe space of not racist.

[23 : 59] See, anti-racism is an act of pursuit, just as gate-breaching is. It examines our spaces of influence and asks why and how the white supremacy within the social and power systems exists, and then it works to dismantle these things.

See, white supremacy enables slavery and Jim Crow and segregation and police brutality, but the path is paved for it by the ingrained and overlooked white supremacy, like that cousin that you don't check for saying the N-word, or that aunt that calls black people lazy, or your pops who has these anti-DEI rants.

White supremacy is what enables ICE to murder immigrants, like Lorenzo Salgado Araujo, and Joan Duran Guerrero, and allies of immigrants like Renee Good and Alex Preddy, or put them into concentration camps or deport them to countries they've never even seen before.

But that path is paved by the toleration of the xenophobia of your co-worker calling brown people terrorists, or says that immigrants are stealing all our jobs.

These things go unchallenged and unchecked and avoided. White supremacy is what enables rapists to remain in power and get slaps on the wrist and discourages women from reporting the violence that's done to them.

[25 : 25] But the path is paved by those of us men not calling out the peer who says that women shouldn't hold seats of power, or those creepy old heads and uncles who ogle and objectify every girl that they see, or that failure of us to value women's voices enough to read books by women, to listen to podcasts by women, to listen to the experiences of women.

I could go on forever into homophobia, transphobia, classism, Zionism, the model minority myth, and on and on and on to expose the depths of white supremacy's impact in this country, and how we enable these things when we choose to gatekeep rather than gate breach.

See, it's not just in conversations, but it's in how we vote, it's in how we protest, it's in how we organize, it's in the art that we create. It's how we serve our communities, it's the papers we write, the corporate campaigns we agree to work on, the international soft power that we accept, our spending habits, the causes we support, there is so much.

We must actively imagine a world of equity and equality in the face of oppression, and move in courage and faith that the gates of hell will not prevail against this radical justice and inclusion. Kendi continues in his book, like fighting an addiction, being anti-racist requires persistent self-awareness, constant self-criticism, and regular self-examination.

[27 : 03] See, anti-racism and gate breaching are both inner and outer words, committed to decolonization and deconstructing of the learned white supremacy that afflicts us all in various measures.

Like the Rainbow Coalition of the Black Panther Party, it imagines a reality where all races, all classes, all marginalized people are working together in collective community to create a tomorrow where all are seen and welcomed and represented.

Where are the Lazaruses in your life? I challenge you to reflect throughout communion today and ask where is the place and who are the people that you need to show up for?

How is Jesus calling you to bring heaven down within your circle of influence? How is Jesus asking you to gate breach, to create a seat at the table in your own community for the marginalized, for the oppressed, for the disinherited, for the forgotten?

This is where imagination comes into play. This might look like having a hard conversation with a loved one about some form of their own prejudice. This might mean putting yourself in a space where you're the minority to build empathy.

[28 : 20] Here's an easy one. The World Cup is today. The World Cup final is today. And if you go to La Cosecha and Union Market, I will promise you the Latine peoples is finna be up in there. So you wanna be around some people and be a minority.

If you are not of that community, that is a good spot to go to and to notice folks around you and to be in a spot where you might not be the majority. It might look like sharing a meal with a houseless person on your block.

It might be organizing in a local justice organization to advocate for the marginalized. It could be Palestinians. It could be Cagalese people. It could be Sudanese people. It could be immigrants that are impacted, immigrants impacted by ICE, right?

You do a lot of things. I'm gonna tell one quick story, personal story. There was one night months ago, I came back from a night out.

I don't do nights out. I go to sleep by nine o'clock most times. My homegirls told me we gotta go out. I said, all right, we gonna go out. So I came back to the house at like 3 a.m. God, why was I out?

[29 : 29] So I had a package to pick up. I go to pick up the package at the front desk in my apartment complex, right? And I see a couple folks. So I know the security guard, concierge, and there was another security guard there.

So I started talking to these cats, right? All black homies. We start talking world politics. And all of a sudden, like, conversation gets deep.

This goes into one person's problematic perspective on Gaza, one person's problematic perspective on women, one's problematic perspective on Trump. All these sorts of things are just like spilling out, right?

It's 3 o'clock in the morning, y'all. I said, God, why? Why me? Will I be a gate preacher? So I stayed at this desk to almost 6 a.m.

I missed church the next day, y'all. I said, Lord, you gotta forgive me. I gotta go to sleep. But stayed there at almost 6 a.m. And I was having conversations and giving game and challenging theologies, all sorts of stuff.

[30 : 33] But it was a wake-up call for me. It was a wake-up call for me for the importance of being present with folks like me, like, cishet black dudes, right?

And to challenge these cats on the things that are problematic to guide them to a better perspective. I can't be holed up in my apartment.

I can't be holed up in my own fixated perspective on something to not create a path to breach the gates, to create room at the table for other people. So I ask again, will you be a gatekeeper or a gate breacher?

Reflect in this time of communion. And when you know what that is, ask yourself, how can you act on that this week, this month, the next opportunity that you get?

Notice who is at the gate that Jesus is calling you to create a seat at the table for. In the legacy of Fred Hampton, of Martin Luther King Jr., I say to you today, if you haven't found something worth dying for, you aren't fit to live.

[31 : 46] Radical inclusion requires risk. Look, Dana lost an arm. But let me say to you, if you dare to dream, you dare to transform.

If you dare to struggle, you dare to win. But if you dare to conform, you don't deserve to win. There is no liberation in the now if you're unwilling to fight for it.

Will you be a gatekeeper or a gate breacher? Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.