

The Rich Man and Lazarus

Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16 and Luke 16:19-31

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Twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost

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¹⁹ “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰ And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹ who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²² The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³ In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴ 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.’ ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ 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.’ ²⁷ He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house - ²⁸ for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ ²⁹ Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ ³⁰ He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ ³¹ 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.’”

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Dear friends of Jesus Christ,

Last week, on Wednesday night, there was a meeting downstairs in the French church social hall, and the room was filled. Every chair was taken. People were standing around the perimeter. And I remember that the room felt a bit warm and stuffy.

And maybe I was the only one. And maybe I was feeling that way because the topic for the evening was money. A couple of tax attorneys and a couple of financial advisers made presentations – this was not a church-related event, by the way, though there were a few people from IPC in attendance – and as the presenters spoke the room became very still and very serious.

The people making presentations were not skilled speakers, and they fumbled around a lot with their PowerPoint presentations, but none of that mattered ... because they were talking about a subject that we all seemed to care about a great deal.

As you can imagine, there was advice about taxes and investments and wills and divorce and a bunch of other related topics.

If you are interested in exactly what was said, ask me, because I took a lot of notes.

The thing is, I do not like money. Well, that's not exactly true. I do like money. But I do not like to talk about money. When people talk about money, I find that I become anxious. My heart rate ticks up a bit. And I begin to perspire.

On Wednesday night, for example, I started to hear about massive fines that the Swiss government could impose if I fail to file form 8650. I didn't know that I was supposed to file form 8650, no one told me, and so I went home on the train that night thinking about where that \$10,000 was going to come from that I would need to pay my fine.

And the fine could be considerably more, we were told, if the Swiss courts determined that we deliberately failed to file form 8650. I was a wreck. Sweaty, panicking.

And I don't think that I am alone in this, even in a city where banking and financial services are so very important to the local economy. Many of us have a complicated relationship with money, even those of us who work with it all the time. In many cases, our feelings about money go all the way back to our childhoods and what we learned about money from parents and our circumstances at the time.

I don't think I have ever met anyone whose relationship with money was simple and straightforward and uncomplicated. (Do you know anyone? Maybe you do!)

In a church I served previously, just to give an extreme (but telling) example, there was a woman whose husband developed a very popular software. (I may have told this story before. It's had a powerful affect on me.) He was not a member of the church, but she was quite active. And if I mentioned the name of the software, you will undoubtedly recognize it, and many of you, I'm sure, use it.

Well, one of the larger software companies in the U.S. bought this piece of software – I think it was Adobe – and the purchase in one day made this couple worth several hundred million U.S. dollars. Their net worth increased exponentially.

Now, you might think this would have been an occasion of great joy, that it would have been a cause for celebration. You might be expecting me to tell you about the wonderful party I attended in the weeks afterward. And I would have gone too.

But the truth is, there were no parties, and there were no celebrations, and there wasn't much joy either. If there was joy, it was every short-lived. Instead there was a lot of anxiety – a little at first, but it grew quickly into what I would call a serious mental health crisis.

Lives were turned upside down, and it was only after a few difficult years when I began to hear good questions being asked, like **“if this is a gift from God – it doesn’t feel that way, but if it is – how I can use it to honor him?”**

One the main reasons I never buy lottery tickets – and this may disappoint you, if you were expecting a better answer from your pastor – but one of the main reasons I don’t buy lottery tickets is that I don’t think winning would make me a better person. And sorry to say, there’s a very good chance that winning would make me a much worse person.

A few studies – more should be done, I think – but a few studies have been done about the effects of winning the lottery, and those studies make for depressing reading. Google it sometime, if you don’t believe me.

Bankruptcy within five years (for more than a third of all winners), estrangement from family and friends (that’s almost inevitable), divorce, higher incidence of alcohol and drug abuse, suicide – these are the typical outcomes of winning the lottery.

Last week in preparation for today I read the scripture reading we heard from Luke 16, and as I often do when I approach a text to preach about it, I tried to examine my own heart. I thought, **“Do I have any strong feelings about this subject? Do I need to acknowledge a bias or a prejudice? How has this subject affected me?”**

And at first I thought, **“Well no, there’s no problem. I’m good. Money doesn’t affect me. I wonder what there is to say this week.”**

And at that moment – it hit me rather quickly – I realized that I was in complete denial.

One of the reasons Jesus spent so much time talking about money – Luke’s gospel never stops talking about money, but it’s not just Luke’s gospel, there are over 3000 references in all of scripture to this one subject – one of the reasons Jesus spent so much time on this subject is that you and I are so conflicted about it. And it gets in the way of a healthy life, a healthy spiritual life.

We may like to say that we don’t have a problem with money or that we’re indifferent. We can take it or leave it. But the truth – very often – is that we like it very much. And we not only like it, but we love it, we love all the things money can do for us. When we don’t have enough, we worry about not having enough and how we will pay for all of the things that we think we need.

And even when we do have enough – have you noticed? – it never feels like enough, and so of course we want more. But we’re never really sure how much is enough.

My parents grew up during the Great Depression, and the 1930s – not only in the U.S., but in much of the world – were a time of crisis. And I think that my parents – like so many other people of their

generation – lived their entire lives, and made all of their financial decisions, based on that life experience. It was so formative for them.

If you haven't reflected on the factors that shape your thinking about money, you should. It would be helpful and enlightening...for lots of reasons.

Let's spend some time this morning with this parable in Luke 16 about the rich man and Lazarus.

What I usually say, when I preach about Jesus' teaching, is that Jesus can be very hard to understand. I usually say that he would leave crowds scratching their heads, wondering what he meant. And then, occasionally, he would get the disciples together later in the day to tell them more clearly what he was trying to teach.

Well, lack of clarity is not an issue with the parable we are looking at today. In fact, its meaning is all too clear. And if this parable does not leave you feeling uncomfortable, then you missed something, and you should read it again.

You may not be feeling all that wealthy this morning, you may be anxious about your financial situation, but that does not change the fact that we are among the rich in the world today. That's not an accusation, that's the truth. We all know people who have more than we do, but compared to the rest of the world we are all ... rich.

And this parable is addressed to us. It is meant to get our attention. And Jesus treats the subject as though it has more urgency than anything else in the world.

In the home group study questions this week, I wrote that no one in all of Jesus' parables receives a name except for the poor man in this parable, and then I waited all week for someone to call and let me know that I was wrong about that, that there was actually another instance. But no one called. And I felt relieved, after making such a bold claim.

Jesus never gave a name to anyone in all his parables, but he gave a name to the poor man here in this story ... and he was called Lazarus.

Why is that significant? Well, I think this name speaks volumes to us. The poor – too often – are for us a category, a statistical category. We like to think about the poor in the abstract. We fail to think of them as mothers and fathers, and sons and daughters. We prefer to think of them as data to be managed, problems to be debated.

But Jesus – and this is very important – Jesus will have none of that.

The poor man in this story is called Lazarus. He had a mother and a father who gave him that name, and though he lived a wretched life – Jesus' description is painfully vivid, isn't it? – even though the circumstances of his life were dreadful, he had a name. He was a child of God.

And after his death, he was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom, a way of saying that he was in a place of honor and a place of rest.

By the way, and this is an important point to remember, Jesus nowhere glamorizes poverty. To be poor doesn't make you better than anyone. Just as being rich doesn't make you better (or worse) than anyone.

Now, it's important to acknowledge that Jesus sometimes did speak critically of the rich. Sorry about that. He was not a big fan of wealthy people, even though he was frequently a dinner guest in their homes.

Two chapters after this parable – this is in Luke 18, although Matthew and Mark contain basically the same words: Jesus says, “...**it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.**”

But the rich man in today's parable does not find himself in hell because he was rich. His sin was not his wealth. I hope you see that. His sin was not that he lived well or that he enjoyed the finer things in life, although it's true that Jesus seems to enjoy adding the details about the things that he enjoyed.

But the rich man is not suffering the torments of hell because he enjoyed himself in this life. If that were true, we would all be in serious trouble.

I found a sermon this week by Martin Luther – the 16th century German Reformer – written about this same parable, and I think I'll just read for you what he wrote: “...**this Gospel text does not accuse [the rich man] of adultery, of murder, or robbery, or violence, or having done anything that the world...would censure. Yea, he has been as honorable and respectable in his life as that Pharisee who fasted twice a week and was not as other men....**”

So, what was the problem?

Well, what landed the rich man in hell – just to be blunt about it – was his utter lack empathy, his total disregard for anyone but himself, his selfishness. It's not that he lived well, it's that he took no notice of the man who was living at his gate and who was eating out of his dumpster.

At any time during his life he could have reached out in compassion, but he didn't.

James Forbes is an African American preacher, and for many years he was pastor of the Riverside Church in New York City. Anyone who has ever heard him preach will never forget the experience. In his prime he was really quite remarkable.

One of his more memorable statements, one for which he will always be remembered, is this: “**Nobody gets into heaven without a letter of reference from the poor.**” And what he meant by that, I think, is that if we show up at heaven's door with degrees and certificates and achievements from prestigious institutions, we will quickly discover that we have all the wrong credentials.

The only credential that matters, Forbes was saying, and I think Jesus means to say this too, is our treatment of the poor.

And if that sounds shocking to you, if you think I might have that wrong, if you think I should go back and study scripture a bit further on this, I want to direct your attention to another place in the gospels where Jesus describes the last judgment, the time when the Son of Man returns in glory, and all of his angels

are before him, and at that moment, the story tells us, he will separate the sheep from the goats. And then Jesus will say to the sheep who are on his right hand,

“Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”

Then the sheep on the right side will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the Son of Man will answer them, ‘Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’”

I wish I had chosen this text on a day when we were receiving a special offering for mission. But maybe it’s just as well that there is no special offering today and no mission emphasis. It’s easy to get caught up in the big moments. And as the fall moves along, there will be some opportunities to give in support of these mission projects.

But this teaching is not about the big offerings. This is about our day-to-day lives, our day-to-day attitudes.

If we who are rich can learn to live with compassion and empathy, if we can learn to live more for others and less for ourselves, if we can forget ourselves long enough to notice the needs of the world, then we will hear these words at the end: **“Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world....”**