

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 25, 2022

“There was a rich man...” So begins the gospel reading for today. And so began last week’s gospel passage as well. Clearly, money matters to the Christian life. In a gospel full of references to wealth and its use, faithful discipleship demands that we engage with these issues.

Chapter 16 of Luke’s gospel follows the parables in chapter 15 of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son. Jesus told those stories in response to the grumbling of the scribes and Pharisees over the company he kept, welcoming and eating with tax collectors and sinners. Now, our focus is directed to the disciples, Jesus’s followers and co-workers in his mission. He tells them the parable of the dishonest manager, and this too elicits criticism from the Pharisees. Verse 14 identifies them as “lovers of money” and connects them with the saying about the impossibility of serving both God and wealth. Jesus’s follow-up to the Pharisees is the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. We can think of this story as a drama in three acts.

In act one, the rich man appears to have everything, and the poor man appears to have nothing.

The rich man is not named. He is sometimes called Dives because that is simply the Latin for “rich man”. He wears purple, indicating that he is a high official, perhaps even a member of the royal family. The Romans had clear rules about who could wear purple and how much purple they could wear. The rich man also wears fine linen, which only the very rich could afford. He has everything a person could want.

We also meet Lazarus. His name is derived from the Hebrew Eleazar, which means “God helps”. But no one else does. Naming Lazarus humanizes him and emphasizes the inhumanity with which he is treated by the rich man. Both in ancient times and today, we tend to equate wealth with virtue. Good people work hard and live righteously; they expect to be rewarded with health and wealth. Likewise, people with means are seen as smart, hardworking, and virtuous because they can acquire wealth. It’s a slippery slope from there to blaming the poor for their state.

The story doesn’t say whether the rich man’s cruelty is deliberate or not. Regardless, there is no defense. In the ancient world, the wealthy were expected to provide alms for the poor in their community. The idea that the rich man is a good person is directly challenged by Jesus’s parable.

It was common to build benches outside houses so poor people could sit and wait for help. A beggar who sat on this bench could expect some attention from a feasting host and his guests. And this rich man feasts every day, meaning Lazarus is denied many times over as people come

and go. The guests would carry or be provided with a knife to cut portions of meat for themselves, which they would then pick up in their hands to eat. Bread was used to wipe the grease and juices off your hands, and then thrown under the table. Lazarus doesn't ask for much, just the discarded scraps of bread. The rich man has more than enough; Lazarus doesn't even get the leftovers. He becomes so weak he can't even fight off the dogs that come and lick his sores. Lazarus is dying unnoticed, right outside the rich man's gate.

In act two of the drama, the rich become poor, and the poor become rich. Lazarus dies. Dare we ask why? Did he die of starvation, while a few feet away the rich man was enjoying one of his daily feasts? Did he freeze to death in his rags outside the room where the rich man slept in linen sheets? Did he die of his infections while the rich man took hot baths and anointed himself with the finest oils?

Unexpectedly, the rich man also dies. Again, we might ask why. Was the burden of his overindulged, pampered body too much for his heart? How horrifying if the rich man ate himself to death while Lazarus starved! The food that would have saved the one might literally have killed the other.

The rich man dies and is buried, probably in the same style in which he lived. Lazarus also dies, but there is no mention of his burial. He doesn't have anyone to perform even this last act of charity for him.

In act three, the reversal of fortunes is complete. The rich man is in Hades, while Lazarus has been taken by the angels to be with Abraham. To Jesus's Jewish audience, this development would have been utterly shocking. Blessings in life were supposed to be signs of God's favour; illness, poverty, and early death were seen as signs of God's disfavour. How could a beggar end up in the place of honour with Abraham? Well, in life the rich man had absolute power and authority. In exchange, he was supposed to play a role. He failed, and now his power is gone. His sin was that he allowed another human being to suffer and die when he could easily have done something about it. His sin was the sin of indifference.

Even now, the rich man tries to use his authority. He addresses Abraham as Father, implying a close relationship with rights and obligations, and asks him to send Lazarus, whom he repeatedly neglected, to relieve his suffering. But because the rich man cut himself off from Lazarus in life, now, in death, no one can reach him. There is a chasm of the rich man's own making. So he asks Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers. And the answer comes, "They have Moses and the prophets", that is, the Scriptures. If the brothers don't heed them, they won't be convinced even if someone should rise from the dead. Everything that needs to be done has been done. It is now their responsibility.

Did the brothers ever get the message? We don't know. That is the question we are left to answer for ourselves. Will we get the message? The message is clear, but that doesn't make it any easier to accept. The gospel is good news, but it is not always cheerful news. The clearer the message, the harder it is to dodge the issues it raises. And the issues this parable raises are plenty. I reach four conclusions:

1. I am the rich one. Let me remind you of the call to discipleship we heard a few weeks ago: "Whoever does not renounce all possessions cannot be my disciple." I am left to reconcile the gospel call for simplicity with the life I live. I have the same wants, hopes, and dreams that most of you have. And it's amazing how quickly something I want becomes something I need. We have come to accept this kind of life as normal, perhaps even as our due. The answers to this dilemma are messy and complicated. Some things we can control; other things we can't. But we, the wealthy people of the world in one of the wealthiest nations of the world, need to stop operating from a fear of scarcity and realize how richly we are blessed. Gratitude is a great antidote to that fear.
2. This story calls me to examine my attitudes to poverty and wealth. There is a subtle pride in success, as though the gifts and abilities I have come from myself alone and not from God. By that token, those who live with poverty, homelessness and addiction are somehow responsible for their lack of opportunities, even if those stem from systemic factors like racism and multigenerational trauma. That is not how God sees it. Time and again in scripture, we hear what a former rector of this parish, Jim Brown, called "God's preferential option for the poor." God is not neutral. God has a bias toward the poor and oppressed.
3. I am called to examine how I am in relation to God. Obviously, money does not establish the relationship. The rich man could not buy his way into heaven. His reputation counted for nothing in the long run. Neither does poverty establish a relationship with God. There is nothing noble or holy about poverty of itself. It is degrading and oppressive. It only becomes holy when it is freely chosen as a way of discipleship and offered in love for God and God's people.
4. It is hard to read the scriptures from a position of wealth. It's not that God hates the rich and loves the poor – nothing as simplistic as that. Rather, those to whom God has given great riches are also given great responsibility. Christian disciples are responsible – "respons-able" – able to respond to what we see around us. When we are judged, it will not be on the basis of how much we earned or acquired, not even on how often or how regularly we attended church. We will be judged on our care for the poor and needy at our gate.

We are well into a civic election in which issues of poverty and homelessness are front and centre. I can't think of a better time for disciples of Christ to hear the story of the rich man and Lazarus. Will we heed its message? We should. We have Moses and the prophets. We even have One who has risen from the dead.