

Several men are in the locker room of a golf club. A cell phone on a bench rings and a man engages the hands-free speaker function and begins to talk. Everyone else in the room stops to listen. MAN: "Hello." WOMAN: "Hi Honey, it's me. Are you at the club?" MAN: "Yes." WOMAN: "I'm at the shops now and found this beautiful leather coat. It's only \$2,000; is it OK if I buy it?" MAN: "Sure, go ahead if you like it that much." WOMAN: "I also stopped by the LEXUS dealership and saw the new models. I saw one I really liked." MAN: "How much?" WOMAN: "\$90,000." MAN: "OK, but for that price I want it with all the options." WOMAN: "Great! Oh, and one more thing....I was just talking to Janie and found out that the house I wanted last year is back on the market. They're asking \$980,000 for it." MAN: "Well, then go ahead and make an offer of \$900,000. They'll probably take it. If not, we can go the extra eighty-thousand if it's what you really want." WOMAN: "OK. I'll see you later. I love you so much!" MAN: "Bye! I love you too." The man hangs up. The other men in the locker room are staring at him in astonishment, mouths wide open. He turns and asks, "Anyone know whose phone this is?"

We know this parable about Lazarus by heart. But the details show just how many layered and rich the text truly is. In this parable, it appears that life after death is tethered to our use and abuse of material goods in our lives *before* death. The rich man is not given a name. Later interpreters called him Dives, which simply is the Latin word for 'a rich man.' The poor man *has* a name – the only name given to anybody in any of Jesus' parables. He is Lazarus, which comes from El-azar, "God has helped."

Both the rich man and the poor man die, and both experience death as a reversal of their earlier lives. The Rich Man suffers torment in Hades while Lazarus lies safe in Abraham's bosom, and the justification offered is disconcerting for those of us who have received good things during our lifetimes. It is crystal clear that the fates of the rich man and the poor man are as radically different in the afterlife as they were in earthly life.

Poor Lazarus lies at the gate (the Greek suggests Lazarus has been 'thrown' or 'dumped' there), which means that the Rich Man has an opportunity to help the suffering Lazarus if he wants to. Jesus draws sharp contrasts, definite binaries between the lives and the afterlives of these two men. After death, Lazarus is carried to a place of honor beside Abraham, father of Israel. The rich man wakes up in Hades, place of torment and eternal punishment.

The two men, who seem to have had no contact in life, begin a conversation after life. The rich man in Hades pleads with Abraham to send Lazarus to relieve his torment, but Abraham refuses saying that their situations have changed. In life, Lazarus suffered, now it's his turn to experience good things. Now Lazarus is comforted, but the rich man is in agony. Sorry, but a 'great chasm' now exists between the two, a gap over which no one can pass.

The gospel then makes a linkage between our ultimate fates and how we have treated the poor and suffering around us. This is similar to Matthew's parable of the Great Judgement in which treatment of the hungry and thirsty, strangers, the naked, the sick, and those in prison determines our eternal fate. (Mt 25:31-46).

This Sunday's Gospel is actually rather typical of Luke's attitude about money and possessions. In His first sermon, Jesus declared that He was sent "to preach good news to the poor." (4:18). Jesus advised His followers not only to invite their neighbors who can repay them, but to invite "the poor, crippled, lame, and

blind.” (14:13) Jesus describes the kingdom of God as a grand banquet where the invitation has been extended to “the poor, crippled, blind, and lame.” (14:21)

Luke also told us of the Widow’s Coin and the Prodigal Son in Chapter 15 as well as the Dishonest Manager’s handling of debts that we heard of last week. All of these parables dealt with the issue of money and wealth. Luke characterized the Pharisees as ‘money-lovers’ (16:14). Though we have little evidence to suggest that wealth was a particular temptation for the Pharisees, it is interesting to note that Luke’s Jesus repeatedly calls into question wealth and the wealthy.

Jesus’ message of good news for the poor would be striking enough, but He preaches quite different news for the rich. The rich young man asks Jesus how he can inherit eternal life only to have Jesus tell him to sell all he has and distribute the money to the poor. This prompts Jesus to remark that it is easier to drive a Mercedes Benz through the night deposit slot at WELLS FARGO than it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. (18:25) A rich man whom the world might call prudent and successful, Jesus names as a fool (12:8-21). Possessions are to be sold and the wealth is to be distributed to the poor (12:33; 18:22). After Jesus proclaimed that ‘salvation has come’ to the house of rich Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector then gives half of his possessions to the poor and repays anyone he has defrauded 4 times as much (19:1-10). In Luke’s second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, early Christians “sold their possessions and goods and distributed the proceeds to all, as any had need.” (Acts 2:45, 4:32-24)

We have been in the gospel of Luke for this entire year, so we’ve heard all of this before. It appears that our eternal fate is determined by how we use wealth to alleviate the suffering of others in this life. So like the rich man’s brothers, we have been warned. But in this Sunday’s Gospel we are warned by a preacher who actually CAME back from the dead in order to tell us this parable. (all adapted from Willimon, PULPIT RESOURCE, July-Sept 2019, p. 40-41)

Second, so where’s the good news? If you feel a bit defensive about this gospel, then we’re coming from the same place. Because by the standards of God and the world – which are the only ones that matter – NOT the lifestyles of the rich and famous – by the standards of the world – I’m rich. And so are most of you. Whether we feel like it or not.

But there’s no way around it. Today’s Gospel is about money. And guess what? I don’t preach about money hardly at all compared to the scriptures. Today’s Gospel is one of hundreds (almost a thousand by one scholar’s count) of places in scripture that money, riches, and material goods are discussed – and mostly in a NEGATIVE way.

This parable takes sides. It is not subtle, and draws the gap between rich and poor as a stark contrast. So is this story of Lazarus and the rich man good news – or bad? You make the call.

There is a lot of discussion of the growing gap between rich and poor. There are all kinds of proposals; I’m not getting into any of that here. As Christians we can hold deep disagreements with one another on these matters. Every 4 years our politicians will all try to convince us that THEY are the ones who are going to help out the overburdened middle class. But none of them say much about the poor. When we speak of the poor, we often speak in ways that suggest that their poverty is their own fault, that they are lazy and don’t want to work, that they have made bad choices and ought to pay for it. In Jesus’ story, it is the rich who are lazy and don’t want to do any work, including good work, and the rich who make bad choices in life that they pay for in the afterlife.

There can be no disagreement that Jesus takes sides, that Jesus has clearly set up the argument in such a way as to indicate that God is not mocked, that in the end God will work justice for the poor whether we do or not, that in the future there will be a price to be paid by those who have enjoyed life's luxuries and blessedness at the expense of denying others basic human needs like food, housing, and health care – which just happen to be 3 of the necessities that were denied to Lazarus. Whatever our political leanings, we can't avoid thinking about the situation of the poor and the rich before God if we are disciples of Christ.

We need to ask ourselves: with whom do we most closely relate in this story? Most of us can identify more with the rich than the poor. Life's necessities have not been difficult for us to obtain. While we may not consider ourselves rich, we've lived with luxuries that many of our forebears would have considered fit only for royalty. Like the rich man in the story, we have been privileged to be served food fit for a king, and we've worn some pretty nice threads along the way.

But even here in our parish, there are some who can more closely relate to Lazarus. You have known sickness in a world that worships health. You have known relative poverty in a world where people's worth is judged by how much money they can accumulate. You have known emptiness and hunger in a culture where most are more likely to perish from too much than too little. Some of you grew up having lots of stuff handed to you by your parents but watched your well-off parents make a mess of their marriage and preside over a sad family life – you know firsthand the limits of wealth. If you fit in any of these categories, then the story that seems harsh to so many of us may seem like good news to you.

And even for those of us who have known relative riches, there is some good news here. Our material blessings are indeed blessings. And yet, the story suggests that even God's blessings become our curses when they are abused to widen the gap between those of us who have more and those who have less. We are not created to be divided, separated from one another by the great chasm of the political right and the left, the rich and the poor. We are created, Christians believe, for communion. God means for us to take responsibility for one another, to reach out to sisters and brothers in need.

Third and finally, there is more good news. Part is that I'm near the end of this miserable sermon! But before I finish I want to tell you about a woman who came to see me this past week. She asked if I would do a funeral for her dog who had died. I told her I couldn't do that, and I suggested that perhaps the pastor at HOPE COMMUNITY CHURCH would help her. "All right," she said, "but can you give me some advice. How much should I pay him -- \$400 or \$500?" "Hold on," I said, "Why didn't you tell me your dog was Catholic?!" Here's some good news --while it's too late for the rich man – it's not too late for us. For starters, we can take a look at our giving. If we are going through life just taking care of ourselves and our families, perpetually proclaiming poor mouth while spending a fortune on Christmas, constantly updating and redecorating our homes, enjoying occasional dinners out, annual vacation, new clothes and new cars, something's got to change. Because we're living selfish lives that are all about me, my family and my wants. One of the simplest ways to begin to address this and get ourselves to an honest place is to give regularly to church. 10% may sound like a lot; it's really not. But start little – and slowly work your way up. Try just 1% for a year. Then when you get a raise, make it 2%, and so on. You'll never miss it – and you will be surprised at what a difference your money can make – both in what good the parish can expand doing, and in how you can change real lives. And remember, the parish only asks for 5% of our giving – the other 5% should go to our other charities – BAA, Catholic Charities, Western Wake Crisis Ministry, Haiti Goat, Habitat for Humanity – the list is literally endless. Tithing is one way to keep ourselves from becoming indifferent, like the rich man of the parable. We don't want to pretend that Lazarus is somebody else's problem. Lazarus is our brother. Lazarus is our sister. And we will be judged on how we care for them – or not. And for a sermon that none of us liked

– but is thank God finally over, let the church say Amen! (entire sermon adapted from Willimon, IBID, p. 41-42)

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