

A four-year old boy had been a terror all day long. As punishment, his mother sent him to bed early. He marched off without a protest, but a few minutes later he was back, carrying his favorite teddy bear, his piggy-bank and some clothes. "I'm running away from home," he announced.

"What will you do when you get hungry?" his father asked.

"I'll come back here to eat," the boy replied.

"What will you do when you run out of money?"

"I'll come home and get some."

"What will you do when your clothes get dirty?"

"I'll bring them home for mommy to wash."

Whereupon the father turned to the mother and said, "This kid isn't running away from home, he's going off to college!"

First, there are a number of challenges with this parable. It's a story of life and death, of the use and abuse of material goods, the gap between the rich and the poor and their ultimate fates. Jesus fails to give the rich man a name. Later interpreters called him DIVES, which simply means 'rich' in Latin. The poor man is given a name – *the only name given to anybody in any of Jesus' parables* – Lazarus, which means 'El-azar,' 'God has helped,' though it seems an ironic name given his pitiable state. The details underline how desperate Lazarus' condition was – while he was ravaging hunger, he lived among the street dogs, which lick his wounds. We should not mistake this canine act as a gentle, medicinal lick from 'man's best friend.' Dogs were not pets for Jews in ancient Israel. They were the scavengers of the streets, vultures with 4 legs. And they circle over the body of Lazarus as he gradually loses strength, waiting for their chance to finish him off for themselves.

The rich man is dressed in purple. The dominant source of purple dye came from crushing murex shellfish around Tyre. It was necessarily expensive; one source estimates that it took 10,000 shellfish to produce a single gram of the dye. Robes so dyed not surprisingly carried a strong odor, but purple's expense made it a status symbol.

The poor man longed to eat what fell from the rich man's table. In the first century, the wealthy did not use napkins to wipe their hands or clean their face after eating. They used scraps of inferior bread for this purpose. So Lazarus is begging to lick clean these so-called 'napkins' after the meal. He does not even hope for leftovers from the entrée itself. We also notice that the text mentions that when the rich man died, he was buried. And it was probably a fancy funeral, at that. But at the mention of the death of the beggar Lazarus, there is no mention of burial, perhaps suggesting the final indignity his body endured from the dogs. We are told that the rich man, still wanting to send people on his errands, pleads with Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his 5 brothers about their coming fate. The rich man now knows the score and wants his brothers to know as well. Abraham responds, rather casually, that they have Moses and the prophets and they haven't heeded their warnings. The rich man counters that maybe if someone came back from the dead, his brothers would change their ways. Having been in Luke's gospel for this entire year, we, like the rich man's 5 brothers, have been warned. Now, in this Sunday's gospel, we are warned by a preacher who actually came back from the dead who told us this parable. (help from THE CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS STUDY BIBLE, p. 1799, and GRACEWORKS, 25 Sept 2022, p 8, and PULPIT RESOURCE, Will Willimon, July-Sept 2022, p. 39)

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OK, so what. Point 2. This parable reminds us that while God is the creator of the world, He is also its judge. God may love all equally but God does not judge everyone the same. God does not regard our riches and wealth in the same way that we do. When the rich man asks that Lazarus be sent to warn his brothers, Abraham dismisses the plea. Throughout the Hebrew scriptures, God clearly warns of the dangers of wealth and the responsibility of those who have for those who have not. God has repeatedly promised – in Moses and the words of the prophets – and now the words of Jesus – that God will one day set things right, that God will judge and fix the world as He intends it to be.

What we have here is an unabashed declaration from Jesus of the prospect of the judgment of God. The world as we have it now – this world with our economic arrangements, our legal structures and immigration laws, our ways of relating to or avoiding one another – this world is not the world that God wants it to be. God did not create our legal systems, nor did God create and bless our economies.

There are many aspects of life in this world that we take for granted. We assume that things have always been this way and will always be this way forever and ever. We often don't reform or push against present practices because we think that the way things are is the way that God intends them to be, world without end, amen.

This parable says otherwise. Our particular ways of relating to one another, the walls that we build between people and countries, the ways that we protect and defend our privilege, our ignoring the pleas of the poor, shall not be tolerated by God forever. There will be judgment. Things will be set right. God will get what God wants. It will be better for us not to be caught on the wrong side of the great chasm.

Finally, we have to face that fact that we are like the 5 brothers in what we just don't want to hear a tough word from Jesus or any of Jesus' preachers about wealth and poverty. A great chasm of our own creation exists between us and this truth about money. We have just heard this story from one who CAME back from the dead. But being the rich of the world simply by being born here, we insulate ourselves against this difficult divine word. We are so easily deaf to God's judgments, God's plea to change our ways and obey what Scripture says about the perils of wealth.

This parable puts the difference in the fate of those who have and those who have not in rather stark terms. Jesus takes sides. He displays what our Catholic tradition calls a 'preferential option for the poor.' Jesus also thinks nothing of harsh castigation of the rich. That includes just about every single person in this church – including me.

The reality is that there ARE people wealthier than us, but there are countless Billions who are poorer. Much poorer. If we make \$14,500 a year, are we poor? Not if we live in India, for example, where the per capita income is just north of \$2000. But in the US, if we're making \$14,500 a year, we are living in abject poverty. According to the "Remember the Poor" website:

--If we made \$1500 last year, we're in the top 20% of the world's income earners.

--If we have sufficient food, decent clothes, live in a house or apartment, and have a reasonably reliable means of transportation, we are among the top 15% of the world's wealthy.

--If we have \$61,000 in assets, we're among the richest 10% of adults in the world.

--If we have any money saved, a hobby that requires some equipment or supplies, a variety of clothes in our closet, 2 cars – in any condition, and live in our own home, we are in the top 5% of the world's wealthy

--If we have more than \$500,000 in assets, we're part of the riches 1% of the world. Which means that almost every single one of us is at least in the top 20% of the world's wealthiest; many are in the 15% and 10% categories, and some even in the top 5% and 1%.

This is a tough gospel for all of us, because it has very practical implications about our obligations to those who are in the bottom 80%. But Jesus loves us enough to tell us that God is a God who loves all humanity enough to love the most vulnerable, hurting, victimized among us. And at the same time, Jesus tells us, in parables like this one of the rich man and Lazarus, that God loves all humanity enough to judge, chastise, and tell the truth to the rich, the powerful, and privileged among us.

In the end, we all have to ask ourselves – are our possessions merely a way for us to engorge ourselves on what we have, to dress up in our finery, buy expensive cars, go on one vacation after another, and give our lives to the pleasures of our affluence? Or might our material possessions be gifts from God that are intended to be used in God's work? Will we heed the words of Moses and the prophets, and even of Jesus?

Knowing who God is and what God's future looks like ought to make a difference in the way we live in the present. If we have ears to hear. Amen. (last 2 sections adapted from Willimon, op.cit., p 40-41)