

The Love of Money

September 30, 2007 ~ 18th Sunday after Pentecost
Holy Trinity UMC

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God is good! All the time! All the time! God is good! Grace abound! All around! All around! Grace abounds! Those were my very thoughts this week as I gave thanks for a gospel lesson that was clear and to the point! But perhaps the opposite will be true and you'll wish that the story wasn't so clear and to the point! There's a rich man and there's a poor man. Deeds are done and lives are lived and there are eternal consequences.

I want to ask you to help me tell the gospel lesson from Luke 16: 19 – 31. Here's how it goes. There was a rich man, who was dressed in fine clothing and who feasted sumptuously every day. I'm going to ask those of you who are seated on the right side of the sanctuary to take the part of the rich man. Your clothes meet the standards for rich folks and I hope that you all ate well this morning before you came to church – and that you can look forward to lunch, dinner and even maybe some snacks before bedtime.

By the way, in the Latin vulgate, the scripture reads *homo quidam erat dives (dee-vays)* which translates "There was a man who was rich." The adjective for rich is *dives* – hence the tradition of calling the rich man by the name of Dives.

Now the story continues that there was also a poor man named Lazarus who lay by the rich man's gate. All he lived for was to get scraps off of the rich man's table. He was sick and covered with sores. His best friends were the dogs who came and licked his sores and lay by his side.

Would all of you on the left side of the church be Lazarus? And since you are dirt poor, you need to give the money that you received in your bulletin this morning to the rich man on the other side of the aisle. That's right. Pass it over.

Now can you act hungry? Tell Dives how hungry you are. Make eye contact with someone on the other side of the aisle and let them know of your hunger.

You might consider it a bit of "foreshadowing" but you need to know that your name, Lazarus means "God has helped."

So we have the "haves" (strut your stuff, rich man! wave that money around!) and we have the "have nots" (look hungry and sick, Lazarus).

Now, unfortunately, death came calling on both of your doors. Death does not discriminate. Whether you are rich or whether you are poor, some day you will die.

The story says that when Lazarus died, he was carried away to heaven by angels to be with Father Abraham. There Father Abraham comforted him on his bosom and reassured Lazarus that his soul would be at rest and that he would live in the shelter of the Most High; abiding in the shadow of the Almighty. God would deliver him from the snare of the rich who had abused and oppressed him

The choir is going to sing heavenly music, like the music that must have comforted Lazarus. (Psalm 91 is chanted and the choir sings a refrain.)

Now, as I mentioned, the rich man also died and was buried. Unfortunately, Dives, the angels did not take you to heaven. The choir will share a recap of this tale and tell you the rest of the story!!

Yes, even as Lazarus was ushered into heaven, the rich man descended to hell. And there you were tormented by fire and flames. You beg Father Abraham to have mercy and to let Lazarus dip the tip of his finger in water to cool your tongue. But, unfortunately, there is this gulf, this chasm – just like this center aisle in the church – and it has been fixed so that no one can get from one side to the other. You are stuck in your agony on this side and Lazarus is comforted by Father Abraham on the other side of the chasm.

Why, you are in such agony that at the end of the story you even ask Father Abraham to send Lazarus to your house back on earth to warn your 5 brothers so that they won't end up with you in hell someday. Father Abraham reminds you that they have Moses and the prophets and that they should listen to them.

Maybe if someone rises from the dead, you suggest, your 5 brothers will repent. But Father Abraham is not convinced that even resurrection would make a difference. If your brothers don't listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.

It is on that note that the parable ends. The good news is that we understand the point of the story. The bad news is that this is not easy news to hear. We are told that we reap what we sow, and that what goes round comes round. The real danger is that we can hear this parable and think that it has nothing to do with us. Most of us are not rich by the standards of those who are "truly" wealthy. Our names are not published on the lists for the wealthiest Americans living, probably not even on the lists of the wealthiest ones in our neighborhood. We weren't born with a silver spoon in our mouths. But we were born on this side of the chasm or somehow we arrived on this side of the chasm simply because we live here in the United States of America, rather than across our southern borders or across the sea. As Americans we live at the head of the chain of consumption in our world. As the richest 20% of the world's population we own 87% of its vehicles, consume 84% of all paper, 50% of all energy and 45% of all meat and fish, according to a United Nations study. But I don't need to recite statistics. You and I know them. And besides, this parable isn't intended to blame or shame us. It's not about making us feel guilty.

This story is about what it means to be a Christian. And being a Christian means being someone who is so in love with Jesus that you are in love with the truth. It means being someone who listens to Jesus telling a story like this one, a story in which our world is honestly depicted, a world where some have everything and some have nothing, a world where there is great inequality, a world where there is a great chasm between the rich and the poor.

And we see and understand because in our world the rich do keep getting richer and the poor keep getting poorer. And somehow we think that each gets what they deserve. The rich have worked hard for their wealth. Theologically, their fame and fortune becomes a sign that they have found favor with God. And the poor? Why we tend to judge what they aren't doing. They aren't working. They are taking advantage of the welfare system. And theologically, the reasoning goes, if someone has lost a job or fallen by the wayside, then, he or she must have offended God and are getting what they deserve.

But Jesus says "NO" to this kind of thinking and reminds us that he came to teach us another way of thinking. He came to proclaim good news to the poor and to warn the rich on the way they spend their money. It would be like Jesus to remind us about the Enron insider trading scandal. Who really suffered from that fiasco? he might inquire. Why it was the lower level employees who lost all their retirement, whose only crime was trusting the wealthy corporate executives to do the right thing, he would claim.

Or, he might change the focus to the devastation in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina. Remember those scenes of the evacuation? he would ask. Thousands of fleeing cars, SUVs and RVs caused gridlock for days on interstate highways. The only people who didn't evacuate were the most obstinate and those who didn't have cars, SUVs and RVs. The weakest, the poorest, the handicapped and infirm, those without bus fare much less flood insurance were the ones who lost the most, the ones who packed into overcrowded shelters without adequate food or water or bathroom facilities. (*Pulpit Resource*, Vo. 35, 2007, p. 59)

Yes, if we really love Jesus, then we also love to hear the truth. And the truth in today's story doesn't end with the honest depiction of our world where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. No, Jesus also renders for us a picture of the world as it should be, the world as it is being made, remade, by the work of God. We see that God has very different intentions for the world than what we have lived. And in that world, the tables are turned and we see Jesus' loyalty and love for the poor. The ones on the bottom find themselves on top and in God's world; those of us on top find ourselves on the bottom.

But the good news is that we have been given a warning! We have the scriptures, Moses and the prophets. We also have Jesus who, we all know, did rise from the dead! And we have a chance to get it right! Jesus story is a wake up call to us, a call to bridge the chasm. It's a call to look at our lives and to share what we have, to consume less ourselves while being intentionally more generous to others. It isn't like we haven't heard this before from Jesus. Why one third of all his parables are about money and possessions.

Jim Wallis notes that there are 908 verses in the bible on the evils of rich people. He said that one time he went through his bible and decided to cut out all of those verses that had to do with the problem of riches and poverty. He ended up with a bible completely in shreds! You take those words out of the bible and you don't have much bible. (*Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 29, 2001, p. 57)

Next month, I'm looking forward to our Stewardship Series which we're calling Money Matter\$. I believe that money does matter and that Jesus asks us again and again and again through the scriptures to be good stewards of our money. If we could all live within our means, actually if we could all live below our means, sacrificing some of our wants for the needs of others, then there would be money to give to our church, and to other projects and programs and causes that serve those in need. How can we reduce our spending so that we have money both to give away and to save for unexpected emergencies – this will be a good question to ponder during our Stewardship Series. I hope that you'll pray about taking the 3 week class on *Getting Out of Debt for Good*. It begins on October 14th at the 11th hour and will be led by Brendan and Jennifer Piscitello. It will be biblically based and full of practical ways to get yourself out of debt for good.

Unlike the rich man in today's story, I believe that as Christians we all want to be generous with our wealth, with our treasures, with our blessings. We recognize God's grace in our lives and we want to respond with generosity to our church and to others. But unless we are intentional about budgeting our expenses and cutting back on what we consume, we will never reach the goal of tithing 10% as well as saving 10% of our income.

There is a story told about a man named Bob (*Lectionary Homiletics*, September 2007, p. 80). Bob heard of a man who lost his job suddenly and unfairly. Bob and his wife began to pray for the man. One night Bob woke up, unable to sleep. A thought kept going through his head: "Give this man 10% of your wages." When Bob told his wife, they prayed about it, and in the end decided that's what God was calling them to do. So Bob went to the unemployed man's house, saying: "You don't know me, but God knows us both. This will seem weird to you, but here is 10% of my wages. And I'll send you a check each payday with 10% until you find work again."

The voice of one risen from the dead whispers to us and awakens us from sleep: How well are we sharing what we have? How well are we managing our finances so that there is money to share with those who have so much less than we do? Maybe we can practice what Jesus preached – right here, right now. How can we bridge the chasm this morning? What suggestions do you have for the rich man and for Lazarus?

Yes, today's scripture lesson is just one of many, many stories that Jesus tells about the way we spend our money. Can we hear the Risen Christ calling to us today, "My beloved disciples, do you love me? Then come, pick up your cross, share your resources generously and joyfully, and then come, follow me." Alleluia! Amen and Amen.