

Giving Beyond Sharing

When it comes to riches and wealth, the Gospel of Luke doesn't mince words. And this year, as we've been working our way through this central part of this gospel, this topic of riches and wealth seems to be relentless. It makes us squirm and wonder what it's all about. For several Sundays now we have been met with some pretty daunting words attributed to Jesus. Some of us may want to throw up our hands and say, "Okay, okay, I get it. Riches and wealth are bad for us and we need to accept that."

It doesn't help when we pause and consider those statistics about the relative wealth that we Americans possess compared to the rest of the world. Even more than that we are discomforted when we ponder our own setting in Gallatin County where we have a very high standard of living when compared with many other parts of the country. And then those really annoying statistics about Presbyterians being among the wealthiest in our country can get under our skin.

Are we really the rich people that Jesus keeps talking about? Are we the ones who are to be made out to be the bad guys?

Come on, aren't we as Christians to come to celebrate the good news of God's grace when we gather together? And isn't that supposed to brighten our spirits and give a sense of joy and wonder?

Where is the good news in all of this talk of riches and wealth?

Well let's see if there are any clues that might answer these questions in this parable of Jesus of the rich man and Lazarus.

It's worth noting from the beginning of this parable the very rich man is not named, while the very poor man is named—Lazarus. This is notable because nowhere in any of the other of Jesus' parables in the Gospel of Luke are any of the people ever given a specific name. So for the poor man to have a name and the rich man to not have a name already provides a clue to where his story is going.

Now even though the rich man is not named, he is described in such a way that there is no doubt that he was among the richest people. That he was dressed in purple is significant since purple dye was extremely expensive at that time, and as a result purple became a sign or symbol of royalty. Only kings and queens and other very rich people could afford purple cloth from which came clothes fit for a king! Jesus goes on to say that so well to do was this rich man that he was able to live in peace and security inside and behind the gate to his place. It's also mentioned that he feasted sumptuously every day. Sounds pretty nice to me.

Literally right under the nose of the rich man is this poor man named Lazarus. He is so poor that he bears the humiliation of living at the rich man's gate with the daily hope that there might be a scrap or castoff from the rich man's household that might tide him over another day. To add insult to injury Lazarus is described as having no access to medical care so that wounds have developed on his body that are so bad that dogs come to lick these oozing sores. Sounds pretty miserable and humiliating to me.

So with the stage set, the parable continues after both the rich man and Lazarus had died. The contrast is stark again. Lazarus is said to have been taken by angels to be with Abraham, while the rich man is buried and now resides in Hades, the realm where the dead are tormented.

Part of that torment for the rich man is that he and his plight are the center of attention for the rest of the parable. While Lazarus is mentioned by name, he is not to be bothered from here on out.

It's the rich man who is perplexed by his destiny and is intent on somehow rising out of it. But it is not to be, for in the schema of this parable, there is an insurmountable chasm between the realm of the dead where the rich man is and the realm of Abraham where Lazarus spends eternity in comfort and security. The dialog between Abraham and the rich man is such that it is made clear that the rich man had his time of comfort in the earthly realm, where Lazarus suffered, and now in this eternal realm it is just the opposite for the two of them. Lazarus lives in comfort while the rich man suffers.

Now the listeners might pause at this point in the parable and try to determine which of these realms they are destined for depending on their station in life now. Am I like the rich man who luxuriates in material wealth and security oblivious to those who are suffering? Or am I more like Lazarus who is so destitute and poor that his life is miserable and deplorable?

Am I destined for an eternity in the realm of Abraham where comfort and security will be mine forever? Or am I headed for the underworld realm of the dead where there will be only torment for eternity?

In both cases you're probably scratching your heads as I scratch mine over this seemingly undesirable conundrum. None of us are really like that rich man? Oh yes, like I said at the beginning, we are certainly rich as Americans, but none of us in this room is part of that infamous 1% are we really? Oh, for sure there are people in our world today who are just like that rich man—so wealthy, so consumed by possessions that protecting and preserving those possessions becomes high priority. But they're people that we read about in the newspaper and see on TV, who draw attention to themselves because of their wealth.

By the same token, none of us as Americans are so poor, so destitute that we are at the mercy of the super rich? And no one in our day is forced to live in physical distress that only the dogs attend to us. Oh, again, there are some in the world today who fit this description, but they're not people we know or who live among us.

But the parable doesn't end simply with Lazarus in heaven and the rich man in Hades. Once Abraham convinces the rich man that Lazarus is not to go on any mission to bring relief and mercy to him, he implores that Lazarus go and warn the rich man's 5 living brothers that they must change their ways so as to avoid the eternal torment that is in store for him.

Abraham's reply to him is instructive. "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them." [The rich man] said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' To which Abraham concludes, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'" (Lk. 16:29-31)

It's the rich man's 5 brothers that are key to this parable as far as its meaning goes for Jesus' first hearers as well as for us today.

It's not messages from the dead that are going to get through to us. It's not fear of eternal punishment that is our motivation for faithful living. It's not even the promise of eternal reward that is the primary motivation in this parable.

As we read the stories of Jesus in the Bible, there's an important thing to remember each time we read through the gospels. Even though they are written in chronological order, for the most part,

the gospels are not simply biographical narratives about Jesus. As Christians we always read the gospels with knowledge and awareness of how the story ends. So when we get to the end of the gospels, we are not surprised or taken aback by the amazing good news of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Before we even read the story of Jesus' birth at the beginning of Luke's gospel, we know that Jesus will be crucified; that he will die; and that he will be raised from the dead, three days later—on Sunday. That good news is just too big to pretend we don't know it as we read through the story.

This is what the parable is talking about. It's the 5 brothers of the rich man who is the focus for us to look at. For they're the ones when this parable is all said and done who are still alive within this world. They're not with Abraham and the angels, and they're not in the realm of the tormented dead.

And isn't that exactly where each one of us is here today? We don't have a Lazarus coming from our future to warn us. But we do have exactly what the 5 brothers had. We have Moses and the prophets to whom we can listen for guidance and direction in our living today.

Moses and the prophets is a reference to the Hebrew scriptures that the people in Jesus' day had. And they reference what we have today in the Hebrew Bible—often referred to as the Old Testament. And we, 2000 years later, are fortunate to have not only the Hebrew Bible but the New Testament scriptures as well.

So in the context of the contrast of the rich man at the one extreme of extravagant riches as well as Lazarus at the other extreme of severe poverty and lack of access to medical care. We're right back where we started, except that we now have a not-so-subtle reminder of the guidance scripture provides regarding the stewardship of our resources.

And when it comes to how we are to live within the world and in relation to others in it, the scriptures couldn't be clearer. We're to care for the widow and orphan. We're to offer refuge to the stranger. We're to comfort the mourning. We're to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, provide water for the thirsty, visit the sick and the prisoner. In doing this, and more, we're living out the greatest of the 2 commandments: To love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself.

Are we listening? Or have the troubles of our day distracted us? Are the wealth and materials we have in our possession distracting us?

Throughout the scriptures—both Old and New Testaments—there is much guidance here. All that we have are gifts from God—all of our possessions, all of our money, everything. To keep that in perspective Jews and Christians alike are called to give a proportion—a significant proportion (10% is mentioned in many places) of our means as an expression of our faith and devotion.

How convenient that our fall financial stewardship campaign is just getting underway. This is the time of the year when you're asked to prayerfully consider how you will give a significant proportion of your resources to your church. This kind of giving goes way beyond a simple sharing of part of what you have. Rather it is an expression of your complete devotion to God through your lord and savior Jesus.

This really is what Jesus was talking about in this what at first seems to be a perplexing parable. Thankfully we have Moses and the prophets and Jesus himself who calls us to remember who we are and whose we are.