

Dollars and Sense

TEXT:
1 Timothy 6:6-11
Luke 16:14-15, 19-31

September 30, 2007

The 16th chapter of Luke is, in the words of one writer, “the money chapter.” In this chapter, Jesus offers two compelling parables that prompt a very serious discussion about money and wealth. As we noted last week, Jesus spoke often about the impact money has on our lives and on our souls. Money, as the writer of I Timothy pointed out, has led many who are rich to wander away from the faith.

Our story last week, the Parable of the Dishonest Steward, spoke about how our wealth should be used wisely. While the story is difficult to understand and interpret, the end of the story is unambiguous. Jesus says plainly, “No one can serve two masters You cannot serve God and wealth,” or in the words of some of the older translations, “God and mammon.” [Luke 16:13]

The second parable in the chapter is the story of the rich man and Lazarus. In this story, the rich man uses his wealth to keep the poor at a safe distance. While enjoying the comforts of his wealth, the rich man fails to see Lazarus begging at his gate.

In between these two stories is a short paragraph. It tells us how the Pharisees responded to Jesus and his comments about money. Starting at verse 14, we see an immediate tension introduced into the context of this chapter. Jesus is talking about money and

Luke describes the Pharisees as “lovers of money.” Perhaps it would be fairer to say that the Pharisees saw money as a sign of God’s favor and therefore they placed great value in it. In their view, wealth followed after godliness; if they obeyed God, they would prosper, their family would be blessed, their livestock would be plentiful and the food on their table would be abundant. [Deuteronomy 28:3-4; Psalm 1:3] To the Pharisee, material wealth was an indication of God’s approval.ⁱ We can certainly see why they were upset and deeply offended by Jesus’ words about God and mammon. The words of Jesus reversed what they thought was true.

In order to get a feel for how deep the tension ran, we are told the Pharisees began to ridicule Jesus. The word used here for ridiculed is used only one other time in the New Testament. It was when leaders scoffed at Jesus while he was being crucified. [Luke 23:35] We are eavesdropping in on a very serious debate.

In response, Jesus told the Pharisees the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus.

After the second service this morning, a group of us will gather in the Library to plan a mission trip to Nicaragua next May. Part of the purpose for this trip is to be with Christians from another culture and to learn from them what it means to be faithful to the call of Christ in their

context. I have had the privilege of traveling to Central America a few times, and one of the things that has been very apparent with each trip is the huge gulf between the rich and poor. As I traveled through El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico and Nicaragua, I have often thought that one of the best ways to illustrate this gulf is to take pictures of the doors to people’s homes. For example, for pictures of the Doors of San Salvador [the capitol city of El Salvador] we would begin in the wealthier neighborhoods, where you would see solid metal gates with fancy electronic entry devices, or coiled razor wire strung along the top of a wall, or broken glass bottles cemented on top of the walls to keep others out. In other neighborhoods, you would find tiny shacks made of up corrugated steel or cinderblocks, with an old, torn woven rug hanging in the door way. The contrast, at times, is stunning.

There was a stunning contrast between the lifestyle of the rich man in our story and the poor man who from time to time came to lie at the his gate, hoping for some of the crumbs from the rich man’s table. This is the only time in any of the parables of Jesus where we are told a character’s name. The poor man’s name was name Lazarus, which means, “God is my help.”ⁱⁱ

The rich man in this story is not described as wicked. He is not seen as being dishonest, as was

the steward in last week's story, or someone who abuses the poor for his own gain. Rather, we see him as a man who is blessed by God.

He is very rich. William Barclay points out that every phrase of this story adds to the luxury in which he lived. He invested in the finest linens of purple. In a culture where the working poor might have meat at their dinner table once a week, the rich man indulged on the finest meals imaginable.ⁱⁱⁱ

But there was one thing he lacked. He was unconcerned about the poor man who lay at his gate, perhaps because he was without a home; who had the terrible sores, perhaps reflecting a lack of adequate health care; and who wished to eat the crumbs of the rich man's table, no doubt because he had no means to provide food on his own. The rich man seemed oblivious to the inequality between their conditions. All his investments were immediate, pragmatic, and egocentric.^{iv}

His sin was that he took no notice of the poor man. Lazarus was simply part of the landscape, he just blended into the crowd; he was invisible.^v

This past week I got new lenses for my glasses. It reminded me of an old *New Yorker* cartoon I have in my files. A man was visiting his eye doctor and was looking at the eye chart with those ever shrinking letters. At the bottom row, there were some figures of people. As the Doctor put on the man's new glasses, he asked, "Can you see the homeless now?"

The late Catholic Archbishop of Brazil, Dom Helder Camara, once wrote:

I used to think when I was a child that Christ might have been exaggerating when he warned about the dangers of wealth. Today I know better. I know now how very hard it is to be rich and still keep the milk of human kindness. Money has a dangerous way of putting scales on one's eyes, a dangerous way of freezing people's hands, eyes, lips and hearts.^{vi}

The rich man in the parable couldn't see the inequities. He couldn't see how it was his concern that Lazarus was poor. He couldn't see how the blessings of wealth he had received could have been used to help elevate the suffering of someone else.

Sometimes, we cannot see any better. In this parable, Jesus draws our attention to a fact of life we all know too well. There is an ever growing gap between the wealthy and the poor. The cover story of *Newsweek* this past week talks about the growing need for medicine in non-industrial developing nations of Africa, medicines that are pretty much taken for granted in the wealthy nations of the West. The Federal Reserve moved quickly to change the financial markets to help investors in the crumbling mortgage industry, even as the residents of the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans wait, and wait, and wait for help to repair and rebuild their community. The President threatens a veto for a program that helps 6.6 million poor children with health insurance, even as we spend \$12-15 billion a month on the war in Iraq.^{vii} The average CEO of a corporation earns as much in one day as the worker on the plant floor earns in a year or more.^{viii}

In this parable, Jesus offers us a compelling illustration of the "haves" and the "have-nots" from the perspective of the eternal. With it we discover the consequences of our moral blindness. We come to learn that how we use our resources, how we use our wealth, has eternal consequences. Commenting on this text, the Catholic priest, Daniel Berrigan once said, "The God of life summons us to life, to be life-givers."^{ix}

In this congregation, we are being called to a greater engagement with the needs of our community. Our Mission and Witness committee is looking at ways to help us gain a greater understanding of the depth of the need in our community. We have been blessed this past year to have welcomed two new members into our church, Paul Hunt and Andy Brown who work with the Ballard Center, an outreach center that help the neediest in our county. We could learn more about the needs in our community. Next week, we will be taking our annual special Peacemaking offering to help some specific needs in our community. Many of us will be part of the CROP walk for the hungry. Each month in the church newsletter, *The First Press*, we learn of opportunities in our community where we might be able to share our time and talents in service to others. In the last few months, I have been meeting along with some of the other clergy in town, with the Mayor, the City Manager, and city staff people, discussing the proposal by the Community Coalition for the Homeless, as we try to find new ways to help with transitional housing for those needing anything from

emergency shelter to permanent, affordable housing.

In this congregation, we are being called to a greater engagement of God's work in our community. As we reflect on this challenging story of Lazarus and the rich man, may our eyes be opened to see some of the doors of Lawrence, Kansas.

ⁱ Brian K. Peterson, "Exegesis," *Lectionary Homiletics*, August-September 2007, 73.

ⁱⁱ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, (Revised Edition), (Westminster, 1975), 214.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

^{iv} Mark Nygard, *Hunger for the World: Lectionary Reflections on Food and Justice, Year C*, ed. by Larry Hollar, (Liturgical Press, 2006), 177

^v Barclay, *op cit.*

^{vi} *Resources for Preaching and Worship; Year C*, compiled by Hannah Ward and Jennifer Wild, (Westminster/John Knox Press, 2003), 256

^{vii} "Following Bush Over a Cliff," by David Broder, *The Washington Post*, Sept. 27, 2007

^{viii} "As CEO Rage, at \$5.15 Stays the Minimum Wage," Ezekiel Edwards, *DMIBlog*, found at http://www.dmiblog.com/archives/2006/06/as_ceo_salaries_rage_at_515_st.html

^{ix} *Resources for Preaching and Worship; Year C*, compiled by Hannah Ward and Jennifer Wild, (Westminster/John Knox Press, 2003), 257.

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