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Luke 16: 19-31

*Jesus, you said that the poor would be with us always, and they are here. On street corners in blistering 100-degree heat, in tent cities, away from the tourist attractions; They are here-women and children, young folks and old folks, some displaced suddenly, others who slid into the abyss that hides them from overly-genteel hearts. The poor are among us. Here they are, Jesus. Hungry and thirsty, in need of a doctor and a bath, desperation in a land of plenty, ragged and shoeless but criticized for not pulling themselves up by their bootstraps. Wake us to their humanity, O God, and shift our eyes from “us” and “mine” to these who are Thine. Amen.<sup>[1]</sup>*

### **“In God We Trust”**

Last week it was a sermon on politics, this week it is a sermon on money!

You’ll be glad to know, though, that this is not a sermon that asks you for money. There will be no great shakedown today. Your wallets are safe! This is, instead, a sermon that tries to address everyday, pressing, real life issues concerning money.

Money is a hot topic today. On the Today show last week I heard someone say that the recession was over in October 2009. Who knew? That’s probably news to the millions of Americans out of work, trying to find a job, trying to sell a house, or trying to make ends meet.

Last week the Forbes list of the 400 wealthiest Americans was published. One has to make at least 1 billion dollars to be on the list. The founder of Facebook was the youngest person on the list. He’s 26 and worth 6.9 billion dollars. Wow. That’s a lot of money for a 26 year old. He also made the news because he’s giving away 100 million dollars to the Newark, NJ school district.

I went to a website this week called [www.globalrichlist.com](http://www.globalrichlist.com). If you have a blackberry or iphone, pull it out and go to the site. There, you can enter your annual income to find out exactly how rich you are compared to everyone else in the world. I am the 55,146,441 richest person in the world *and* in the top .91% richest people in the world!

Of course, I don’t feel wealthy. I struggle to make ends meet. Kids don’t come cheap, you know! There’s always something . . .

Like all of you, I have to make choices every day about how I spend my money. Most of us struggle every day with issues of money – how much to spend, to save, to share; what to spend it on, where to share it, and so forth.

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I know I've told you this before, but Jesus liked to talk about money more than anything else. And yet, I'm not sure churches do such a good job of talking about money. We're either asking for money, or telling folks it's evil (mammon is the Biblical word), ignoring the subject of money despite the fact that what we do with our money is a real, everyday pressing concern for people, or-as in the case of the prosperity gospel preachers-telling folks that wealth is a sign of God's blessing. This, of course, also sends the message that if you're poor God does not favor you. As an aside, there are some younger evangelical preachers speaking out against the prosperity gospel. Bill Downs and Joe Morris sent me a great article from David Brooks in the New York Times about this movement. I'll post it on the blog later today if you'd like to read it.

[http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/07/opinion/07brooks.html?\\_r=2&ref=opinion](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/07/opinion/07brooks.html?_r=2&ref=opinion)

But let's go back to that idea that wealth is a sign of God's blessing, because that was a very popular idea at the time Luke wrote his gospel and one with which his listeners would have been familiar. In fact, they would have been so familiar with it that it would have come as a great shock to them that the rich man in today's parable wound up in Hades.

There are two worlds at work in today's parable. There's the earthly world and the world that awaits us, and there is the world of the haves and the have-nots. There are strict boundaries in these worlds, so much so that they are impossible to cross. Lazarus the poor man can't cross the gate into the rich man's world, and the rich man can't cross the boundary into heaven after his death.

These two worlds never cross. The rich man sits in his home in his gated community and feasts on his decadent food while Lazarus sits at his gate while the dogs lick his sores. A very important point in this parable is that the rich man is completely oblivious to Lazarus. He doesn't see him! He has no idea he even exists!

Until he winds up in Hades. Then he sees Lazarus in the bosom of Abraham. It's an interesting choice of words that Luke uses, because children rest in their mother's bosom and there they are fed, kept safe and warm, an experience that Lazarus never had in his earthly life.

From Hades the rich man looks up to see Lazarus and says, "Father Abraham, please have pity on me and send Lazarus to put his cool finger on my hot tongue."

In reply to the rich man's request Abraham says, "Child, you had so many comforts in your life, now Lazarus is enjoying those comforts here, and you are in agony."

So he makes a second request of Abraham, "Send Lazarus to my brothers, so they don't suffer the same fate." But Abraham replies, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them." But the rich man, in his third and final request, says, "They'll repent if a dead man goes to them." But Abraham says back, "If your brothers won't listen to Moses and the prophets, why would they listen to a dead man?"

This story is about many things. It's a story about how riches cannot save us. It's a story about what happens to us if we ignore the plight of the poor. It's even a story about faith and certitude.

But at its core, I think this is a story about how we're supposed to follow Christ. There's a running commentary in Luke that if one wants to be Christian, one needs to walk the walk and talk the talk and, yes, put one's money where one's his mouth is.

You might remember that way back in June, when we were just setting out in what the church calls "ordinary time", I said that *In the these readings from Luke we'll hear stories about how to follow Christ, what it means to follow Christ, and yes, even how not to follow Christ.* This is one of those stories we're told as an example of what we should not do.

The problem with the rich man isn't that he persecuted Lazarus, or refused him food, or sponsored legislation to rid the gate of poor people, it's that he didn't even see him. His wealth insulated him from the needs of others, so much so that he no longer saw "the others". He'd gotten very adept at keeping Lazarus' suffering at arm's distance. And for that crime, he wound up in Hades where he was more than an arm's length away from the "good life".

I think this is an important lesson for us to hear, because in this shrinking world of global communication where the world's suffering is one click away, it's even easier to look the other way and click away. But even in this metropolitan community where what matters is where one went to high school and where you live, it's easy to keep suffering at an arm's distance. We have many gated communities in St. Louis that keep "the other" out, and in this wealthy community it's very easy to keep suffering at an arm's distance.

But this parable is a call to action. It's a call to all of us and to all churches to step out of our places of privilege, to look into the eyes of the hungry and homeless, to see them as a child of God, and then to help them. Because it's not enough to just feel empathy; our Christian faith requires us to do something, too-like reorient how we spend our money so that the Lazarus' of the world do not have to sit and beg at the rich man's gate.

John Buchanan once said that, "Christian faith is a moral compass, and it takes moral courage to consult it and not ignore it. Christian faith mandates moral courage to see injustice and name it. There will always be resistance to that, because it leads to changed behavior and changed personal priorities and changed spending habits."

At the stewardship conference a few years back, Barb Abbett and I were privileged to hear Rick Ufford-Chase, the former moderator of the General Assembly, speak. This church was privileged to host Rick when we hosted the presbytery a couple years ago.

Rick tells us an unforgettable story about leading a group of thirteen American volunteers in a building project in a remote mountainous Guatemalan village. At the end of the day, the volunteers had to take public transportation back to the village where they were

staying with Guatemalan families. Public transportation meant a rusty, old, beat-up Toyota minivan. There were already two men in the van. The thirteen Americans squeezed in, and a few miles down the road, the driver stopped to pick up two more men, one of whom had a one-hundred pound sack of corn. The Americans dreaded what might happen next. The farmer proceeded to hike the sack of corn up onto the roof of the Toyota, squeezed in, and off they went until the sack broke open and the corn spilled all over the road. Whereupon the driver stopped and invited his passengers to get out and help pick up the corn—every kernel—which they did. Rick said, “We can’t imagine an economy where every kernel of corn counts.”

Christian faith requires us to see need and injustice, to name it, and to do something about it. As one theologian said, “If I am hungry, that is a physical problem; if my neighbor is hungry, that is a spiritual problem.” (As told by John Buchanan, “The Economics of Faith”)

I heard someone say yesterday that the essential characteristic of a Christian is generosity. The essential characteristic of a Christian is generosity. When I first heard him say that I thought, “Hmm.” The wheels started turning in my head, because such broad statements usually give me pause. But the more I thought about it, I realized, he’s right. Generosity is the most important characteristic. Because generosity assumes that one is also compassionate, or loving, or kind, or caring or all those other adjectives we think of when we think of a Christian. But you can’t really be kind, or compassionate or loving without being generous.

And this is why, I think, Jesus talked about money more than anything else, because Jesus knew that at the heart of all those other characteristics, there is a generous person.

So here’s what I’m going to do. I’m going to give all of you money. It’s not much, I’d like to give you more, but I’m going to give all of you a \$1 bill. I want you to take this dollar bill, this tangible sign, and put it someplace that will make a difference in someone’s life.

You might wonder what a dollar can actually do, but I think there are some places you could put it:

Example: kids’ school/Fallapalooza, street guy, extra tip to your breakfast waitress.

You can also get creative and pool your resource. I’m going to ask you on the blog how you spent this dollar, and I want to get an answer from every single person here today! I want you to think about how this exercise opened you up to the needs of others and how you encountered God (if you did) when you encountered that need.

Because we can’t go through life ignoring the needs of others and call ourselves a Christian, we can’t go through life clinging tightly to our money and call ourselves a Christian, and we can’t go through life and keep those in need at arm’s distance. Well, we could, but I don’t want to suffer the same fate as Lazarus. Do you?

Amen.

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