

Sermon, Luke 16:19-31, 9/25/2022 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

Oh boy, the rich man and Lazarus. More words from Jesus about money and wealth: his favorite topics. Three years ago when this set of readings came up I preached about Jeremiah, so this time around I figure I better tackle money and wealth again, even though we just talked about this last week.

First, notice that this rich man, unlike the poor man, does not get a name. He dresses in fancy clothes not for church but because he can, every day. And he feasts sumptuously not on special occasions, but every day. Sometimes I remind you that we are like the Pharisees in the Bible or that many of us even in our little church are considered rich by the standards of most of the rest of the world, but that is not the case here. This guy in the parable is obnoxiously wealthy, and the details about his dress and eating habits suggest that he was *not* using his wealth to serve God.

Furthermore, the rich man ignored Lazarus even when Lazarus was right outside of his gate. This is different than failing to give a manna bag to a stranger standing in the median by a stoplight. The rich man knew Lazarus's name. When he's in Hades, he asks Abraham to send Lazarus to him. Lazarus was not a stranger to this rich man.

We are told the poignant detail that while they were alive, Lazarus longed to eat the rich man's scraps. And OK, this really isn't relevant, but as a dog lover I have to say something about those dogs who licked Lazarus's sores. Much has been made over the years about how that was an additional torment, but I agree with Amy-Jill Levine, a New Testament scholar¹ who points out that licking the sores would have been helpful to Lazarus given the healing properties of saliva. So really, rather than tormenting Lazarus, those dogs were likely a comfort to him. A comfort as he lay outside the gates of the rich man's home, starving and covered in sores.

So, this rich guy is obnoxiously wealthy, not like the rest of us: more like the people in those reality television shows that I told you all are my guilty pleasures, where women have special raincoats just for their Birkin purses and sneer at flying commercial vs. on a PJ—private jet. But even though this guy is that kind of wealthy, that doesn't mean that we are off the hook.

Jesus is a master storyteller, and by creating characters who are extreme he gets his point about wealth across in a way that would have made his listeners more able to absorb it.

What about those of us listening to it today? If we don't have Birkins or private jets or dogs licking our sores, is there anything in this parable for us?

Some consider it to be a description of heaven and hell, with angels on one side but torment and fire on the other. I maintain that this is a parable, a story, not a description of the afterlife. Regardless, we can see that Jesus has *very strong opinions* about the dangers of wealth, which we already knew if we had read any other parts of the Bible. Jesus was not alone in this, of course: first Timothy this morning also contains the famous line “the love of money is a root of

¹ Levine, Amy-Jill, *Short Stories by Jesus: the Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, New York: HarperCollins, 2014, 258-259.

all kinds of evil,” and money and idolatry are at the root of much of the trouble we’ve been hearing about in the book of Jeremiah for weeks.

As I preached last week, we are called as Christians to use our wealth to serve God. What would that have looked like in the context of today’s parable? This unnamed rich man had a bunch of money: so much that he dressed and ate lavishly for no special reason. He appeared isolated. We don’t see him feasting with others, and we know that he ignores a man whose name he knew who lay in need outside of his home.

Do your gifts, whether they are money or something else, isolate you? Being here at St. David’s suggests that you long to be part of a community of people who seek after God. I believe that the rich man would not have neglected Lazarus in such a horrible way had he been a part of such a community—a community where people serve each other. His thoughtlessness extended all the way to Hades, where he wanted Lazarus to serve him instead of trying to serve others.

We are entering into our fall pledge campaign here at St. David’s. Many detest hearing me preach about money, but I must preach about money, because the love of money was a major topic for Jesus. How we spend our money is a spiritual issue. This is hard to hear. I spent so much money on streaming services and books and clothes. What does that say about my values?

Last Sunday, I told you how my salary and benefits are the biggest single expense for St. David’s. In my own personal spending, my pledge to St. David’s is one of my largest personal expenditures, far exceeding streaming services and internet and books combined. It’s tempting to think what else I could spend that money on, but it’s more satisfying to think about how my pledge is used here. About the lives that are enriched. The relationships with God that are strengthened.

As a church, St. David’s wants to continue to live into our ideal as the corner church. We want to be good neighbors, unlike this rich man. A few weeks ago, Marti Stephens-Hartka and I asked if any of you might be willing or able to work on building a couple of those “little free libraries” for us. Have you seen those? They are tiny collections of books that anyone can take. We would love to have one for adults and another one that is kid-sized with kid books. People walking by could see them and take a book. Maybe if they hadn’t noticed our labyrinth before, a little free library might entice them to try it out.

And we thought, wouldn’t it be fun to collect a favorite book from everyone along with our pledge cards—a book that could be given away in a little free library?

I love the idea of the church possibly becoming a little more visible to people in the neighborhood. I love the idea of sharing things that we love with those around us without anything in it for us.

Besides reminding us that we cannot serve God and wealth in case we didn’t get the message with last Sunday’s reading, this morning’s parable invites us to look at those who are around us and ask ourselves how we are treating them. Who aren’t we seeing outside of our gates, and is there a way that we can serve them?