

Luke 16:19-3: The Rich Man and Lazarus

Year C, Proper 25; Dale Ramerman; September 25, 2016

Money and possessions form a central theme of the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. Remember the saying of Jesus about it being easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to reach heaven? That is in the 18th chapter of Luke. The Gospel of Luke and Acts challenge us to reflect on our values, and to consider whether we are living our lives in accord with Jesus' teaching. Are money and property our main priority, and central to our self-identity? Are we constantly demonstrating and bragging about our wealth? Do money and wealth get in the way of what God calls us to be, preventing us from living out Jesus' values?

The homeless, the hungry, the mentally ill, those who have neither wealth nor status, can be seen on the streets of every city and town. They are part of the landscape. We have all probably passed them on the street where they are often asking for money. And I, and maybe you, just wish they would keep out of sight. Seeing them makes me uncomfortable.

When I first worked in downtown Seattle in the 1960's, I was shocked by how many there were, day after day. I recall one man in particular, compulsively wiping his hair with one hand while sorting through a street trash container with his other hand.

But I also recall after a time not noticing those living on the street as they became part of the life of the city, nameless people with stories known to no one.

What we do is make up stories about them, stories that assuage our guilt: we dismiss them as alcoholics or drug users, or shiftless, lazy people, and tell ourselves that to help them with a donation would only enable their destructive choices. We tell ourselves they deserve their fate; they are not our responsibility, and then, pretending to be too busy, we pass them by.

Perhaps that is what the rich man in our parable said about Lazarus, living at his gate. I find the parable of the rich man and Lazarus one of the most difficult of all Jesus' parables: easy to understand, but deeply troubling. It illustrates the message at the heart of the Song of Mary, the Magnificat, also

found in Luke's Gospel: he has scattered the proud in their conceit, he has cast down the mighty and lifted up the lowly, he has filled the hungry and sent the rich away empty.

Lazarus, the poor man in the parable, spends each day at the gate of the rich man's home, but is invisible. If we don't see and interact with the poor in our midst, we cannot have compassion for them. It is harder to ignore someone whose name you know, so by not learning their names they remain nobodies whose existence we need not acknowledge. In the parable, the poor man, is identified as Lazarus, a Hebrew name meaning "God has helped." Lazarus, after his death, rests in the company of Abraham.

The rich man is not named in the parable; he is identified only by his wealth. But because rich people are too important in our culture not to have a name, Christian tradition has named the rich man Dives.

The rich man has also died but resides in Hades, the eternal abode of the unrighteous, named after the always smoking garbage dump outside the walls of first century Jerusalem. But the rich man is still giving orders: "Send Lazarus to put cool water on my tongue," he calls to Abraham. And when Abraham says this is not possible, the rich man asks that Lazarus be sent to warn his family. Abraham responds, that if they did not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not listen to Lazarus.

How can we respond to the poor in our midst? My instinctive reaction is to avoid them. But there is a better reaction. We can start by telling them our name and asking their name. And then we can call them by name whenever we see them. That small step gives some measure of dignity and recognition as a fellow human being. We can ignore the nameless, but not someone whose name we know. When calling them by name, we can use a friendly voice and perhaps smile as we greet them. A small bit of cash with a card giving the location of nearby food banks, shelters and free meals may be a nice gesture. Take a chance and see where the spirit leads.

The great 20th century Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel says compassion, or in his terminology "divine pathos", is the essence of the God disclosed in the prophetic tradition of ancient Israel. God reveals God's self in a personal and

intimate relationship to the world. He does not just command and expect to be obeyed. He is moved and affected by what happens in the world. Indeed, God's compassion for the world, his willingness to be intimately involved with the history of humankind, is the essence of God's nature. God's involvement with humankind is the essence of the incarnation.

Compassion is not pity, sorrow or condescension. Pity, condescension, even love, are emotions we can manage from a distance. True compassion is experienced face to face. That for me is why seeing refugees face to face in Turkey and Iraq was so life-changing, and compels me to pray for refugees. The German word for compassion is literally, "with suffering." God's compassion is a compassion that suffers, a feeling that comes from solidarity with those for whom God has compassion.

More may be required of us, however, than compassion. The systemic poverty we see must be addressed in the short term by community feeding programs where meals and groceries are provided. Churches should, and many do, take the lead in organizing such programs. But long term programs are also required, such as housing, job training, and school programs. Many of these programs must be implemented by different levels of government including school districts. We can advocate for programs in our local schools and communities such as before school breakfasts, free lunches for those who qualify, and weekend and summer meal programs for homeless and hungry children. We can be advocates for better vocational training in our public schools and community colleges, training that will lead to jobs.

In a few minutes we will pray the Lord's Prayer, and we will petition for our own daily bread. Shouldn't we also be working to provide daily bread for the hungry in our midst?

Our gospel reading from Luke is not about getting an eternal reward by believing the right thing, or worshiping in a particular way. It is about how we live our lives from day to day. That, perhaps, is why the rich man's request that Lazarus be sent to his family to warn them, would have no effect. The rich man's family, like the rich man, knew what should be done, but didn't care because their own priority was taking care of themselves and being rich. What they needed to do, in the words of the Gospel, is repent. "Repent" means to turn

around, go a new direction. Or, to say it another way, to implement in our lives a new priority of service to the poor and downtrodden, the strangers and refugees among us.

The good news of the Gospel is that we are empowered by Jesus and the Holy Spirit to change the direction and priorities of our live, and to recognize, befriend and serve the poor, the mentally ill, hungry and the refugee in our midst. Amen.

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Amen

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