

The Rich Man & Lazarus | Psalm 146, Luke 16:19-31 | 9/28/25 at FPC LC

Earthly actions have heavenly consequences. The measure we give now will affect the measure we get later.

Church, as many of us already know, we have had a variety of very good preachers in the last couple months who have been keeping up with the lectionary as it explores Luke's gospel. And Luke, as you further know, has a lot to say about wealth, riches, and how they'll play out in the Kingdom of God. So much so that today we get to something of a climax wherein Luke is presenting to us a lesser known parable of Jesus'. And it's a parable that the excellent scholarship and preaching we've received for the past few months has prepared us well for.

See, we already know that Luke takes some issue with the wealthy in his gospel. After all, we could look at Mary's Magnificat where Mary sings before Jesus is even born of the one who will level the field, who will pull down the rich and uplift the poor. We could look at Jesus' own declaration about his ministry in Luke 4 where he quotes the prophet Isaiah and says in part that his mission here on earth is to bring freedom to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and let the oppressed go free.

We could look at any number of stories of Jesus that Luke specifically recounts in this style of a grand reversal going on. When God shows up, what we too often consider our riches become markers of our spiritual poverty. And very often, our earthly needs are God's way of digging us out and preparing to fill us back up with a deep and abiding grace.

And so, when we get to this parable, this story that we are meant to not take too literally but instead to unravel and examine for its spiritual truths, we would be correct to first take a stab at it through the lens of wealth.

There is a rich man, the text says, and there is a poor man. Jesus, He tells us about them in black and white contrasting language. One lives in a fancy home and the other gets laid down in front of his gate each morning. One is dressed in fine purple linen and the other only in sores. One feasts in abundance as the dogs gather around the table to eat the scraps. The other lays in the street, where the dogs come only to lick his wounds. And, as will be the case for every last one of us, they both eventually die. The rich man, you can imagine, has an elaborate funeral and burial. The poor man, well, Jesus puts it kindly -- he was carried away by the angels.

Now, the rich man is, as the text says, in Hades (which real quick, the use of the term "Hades" here, a cultural term in that time and place, is a clue to us that Jesus is telling us a story here with a moral, not a literal teaching on the nature of the afterlife).

But, the poor man, Lazarus, who is not to be confused with the man who passes away and is brought back elsewhere in the Gospel, he gets something different. First of all, he is the only person ever named in any of Jesus' parables. That is, special attention is given to his identity. A grand reversal from how he was overlooked in life. And second, he is in the very bosom of the father of faith, Abraham. You can picture that as him sitting next to Abraham at a feast. You can picture that as him tucked away in Abraham's robe like a father holding a baby.

Either way, given all of this, we conclude that Luke is condemning the rich and uplifting the poor. He is showcasing this parable of Jesus' to say it really is that simple. If those who *have* shared with those who *have*

not, the world would look much more like the Kingdom of God. All we have to do now is check that against the original context of the parable, say the benediction, and go home.

So, we back up all the way to the beginning of Luke 15, the last chapter, where it tells us why Jesus was giving teachings and parables like these in the first place. And we see it says that it's because He was getting derided by the Pharisees for sitting with tax collectors, sinners, and outcasts.

And church, you all know already, that this causes us to pause and deepen our theology a bit. I couldn't let us off that easily. See, Jesus is telling these stories because of, yes, some issues concerning wealth. But, more broadly, we see that these issues are really about who is included and who is excluded. These stories were presented in the first place as stories about who God makes use of, and what stands as a stumbling block to God getting God's way in our world.

And we pause even more so because we know already that the early church quite often made liberal use of wealthy folks -- that while Christianity was rare amongst the far off elites in Rome, even Luke himself will later make mention of folks like Lydia who herself was wealthy, adorned in purple, and an amazing asset to the Church.

And if the words of Jesus and the history of the early church weren't enough to cause us to pause and deepen our theology a bit, frankly, we still might want to pause as 21st century Americans where even the poorest amongst us today live in ways that would make the rich man of this parable jealous. To put that another way, if God is making a blanket condemnation of all the rich in this parable, we ought to know that all of us today, all of us, would be part of the condemned.

So, we continue to look at this parable but now with an awareness that it's not just the dangers of wealth that's being taught about here, it's something more social and spiritual that often comes alongside wealth. And when we do, this next beat of the story comes alive for us.

See, we come back to Lazarus who is just beaming, happy as a clam, tucked away in Abraham's bosom. But, things change pretty quickly when they hear a voice from below. "Help, help!" says the rich man. Notice he speaks only to Abraham here. "Help me father Abraham, why don't you send that boy Lazarus down here to do something for me?"

But Abraham, not with vengeance or anger, not with any capriciousness or malice, just very matter of fact says back "you remember that gate of yours that Lazarus got laid outside of each morning in life? You really should have opened that up and let him in. For here, in the afterlife with the father of faith Abraham, far above and beyond what the text calls Hades, there are simply no more gates to be found. There is, instead, a large chasm between us. What's done is done."

But, of course, it doesn't stop there. See, the rich man, still unwilling to acknowledge the situation or even speak to Lazarus himself, retorts "well then send Lazarus along. I have five brothers still living and surely if they saw a man risen from the grave warning them of their ways, they'd change. At least that boy can do that much for me."

Does that sound familiar to us, church? Any fans of Charles Dickens here? Maybe if these brothers of his were visited by three ghosts in the night, they'd finally let their clerk off on Christmas morning so he can spend the day with Tiny Tim. That's what he's asking for. Give his brothers a ghost story of sorts, spook them, have them change their ways.

And yet, once again Abraham responds very matter of factly, "Don't they already have a book that goes over what God wants of them? In fact, in addition to the book, don't they know a guy who meets weekly to read it part by part and explain it all to them? Why don't they just do that? I'm sorry but it's a little late to be asking for a miracle."

Church, do you see the added depth to this parable? Yes it's about wealth, but yes it's also about what we do with our wealth. Do we use our wealth to cover up the fact that there is suffering in this world that we are called as Christians to sit with and address? Do we use our riches to build walls that keep us from ever having to encounter folks in need? How will that play out when the grand reversal Luke spends so much time emphasizing shows up in our own lives?

If we were to shift our attention for a moment to Psalm 146, we would see some of those same questions come up for us. See, the good news in this psalm is that God has bigger plans than just what seems apparent in this life. In fact, the good news is that God is always on the side of working out justice for the oppressed. But, that makes us wonder what might be the news for those doing the oppressing? If the LORD gives bread to the hungry, what might be the message to the folks running the bakery? If the good news is that God sustains the widow and the orphan even amidst their plight, it seems fairly straightforward that God is also the one contorting the way of the wicked that's putting them through that plight.

And so, with that in mind, we return to our parable for the day and we start to see more of what Luke is addressing here. It's not just wealth on its own, its inhumanity that is the real issue. Wealth is just the tool that's being used to make that inhumanity possible.

See, what this is, is what the Jewish philosopher and ethicist Emmanuel Levinas calls the "ethic of the face." In other words, what Luke is advocating here is not just an issue of wealth, its wealth's proclivity to allow us to treat others inhumanely. To not look folks in the face and do right by them. Because, see, we all tend to know how to treat people right when we're standing right there in front of them. And so, what Luke is pointing us towards with this parable of Jesus' is our tendency to hide from and create distance from those we don't want to do right by. It's our building walls and special cliques. It's our backroom deals and decisions we make *about folks* without ever being willing to talk *with those folks*, to look at those folks as though they are truly someone God loves.

But at any rate, now that we're up on this parable, we do one last review and get ready to call it quits for today. Right? We say, "Got it. Wealth can be a deep spiritual danger, especially when we use it to hide away from folks in need that God loves. What's important is looking at each person in the face and doing right by them. I'll try harder."

But then, we notice one last thing. We notice that oddly enough, this whole parable exists in a genre of folktales that go as recent as *A Christmas Carol* and as far back as Egyptian mythology. And when we notice that, we notice that just about every other story contains that beat - someone from the dead returns to the land of the

living, wags their finger at the rich, and then departs. Every other instance, except for this one time when Jesus tells it, contains that beat. So, what's going on here?

Could it be that Jesus here in Luke is showing us one last grand reversal? For we know, in Luke and elsewhere, when Jesus does return to us, when the resurrection occurs, it is not so that he can wag his finger and condemn folks. Instead, what's He do? He sits with folks. He eats with folks. He loves folks just the same as He did before. The whole time, the resurrected Christ tells us not one more law and finger wag. No! He shows us where real and eternal life is happening.

Could it be that Jesus is teaching us here that there will be a grand reversal on levels we had not previously considered? Yes, that the poor in this life will have incomparable riches in the next life. But it's a bit deeper than just that. Truthfully, those who are excluded in this life will find themselves included in the next life. And yet, it's even deeper than that! We see here, through this change to the story and through what it looks like when Christ does in fact return from the grave, that this whole teaching has not been a condemnation of anyone. This is not Jesus wagging his finger at the Pharisees or at us.

It is instead Jesus who still sits with the poor, the outcasts, the sinners; and He is telling us we are missing out. We are missing out on the rich banquet of grace God is throwing right now. Right here, right now, there is immense grace and life and love to be found if only we let go of our riches, if we would let go of our exclusion, if we would let go of justifying ourselves and blaming others; if we would simply go sit together and look in the faces of all the people God loves, we would find good news.

We find in this parable that we too often make a faulty assumption. We too often think that where there is no pain, where there is only joy, and peace, and serendipitous jubilee; there is Christ. But what we are actually seeing is that wherever there is pain, wherever there is hardship and famine and strife and going without; there Christ is, making a banquet of grace.

And church, that's something we can work with. We can all go find someone who we overlooked. We can all make amends with folks we have built walls up towards, whether that be because of differences in wealth or any other reason. We can all look in the face of someone we previously hadn't really seen. Therein is Christ and therein is the good news of this parable.

Let's pray...

God, in Jesus Christ, You are the one who overcomes the great chasm between us.

Teach us, O Lord, to do the same.

Allow for your Church to be the place where reconciliation happens.

Allow Your Body to look and act like the one whose body we are.

Make us workers of righteousness more than critics of wrongness.

Show us your face in the face of the beggar, the orphan, the widow, and all those who we long to build walls up against.

Teach us a new way of being this day.

Where we find true and everlasting life not in the uncertainty of riches

But in the certainty of your presence amongst us.

In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.