



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 16 Proper 21 (C)

Real Life

[RCL] Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15; Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16; 1 Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31

We have all heard that the “love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.” While that is certainly true, the maxim alone may leave us feeling judged, helpless, or defensive. Thank goodness that isn’t the only thing Paul said about wealth as he coached Timothy about how to pastor communities with wealthy folk in them. He says that rich folk are to “do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the *life that really is life*.”

You see, Paul knows, as Jesus knew, as the Psalmist knew, as Amos knew, as God knows... that wealth can be a particularly heavy and intransigent stumbling block when it comes to living wholeheartedly, living the abundant life Jesus offers, living the *life that is really life*. Too much money can easily get in our way. In fairness, too little money also poses its own temptations, but that’s a topic for another time. Traditionally, for better and worse, more people in our particular denomination of Jesus-followers have wrestled with the temptations and blind spots that come with having too much money, rather than too little.

Whether through aphorisms like we heard at the beginning of the sermon, or prophetic censures from Jeremiah or Amos or Hosea, or poetic exhortations as we hear in the Psalms, like “The Lord cares for the stranger; he sustains the orphan and the widow, but frustrates the way of the wicked,” or the familiar folktale Jesus turns into a parable in the Gospel reading, the plain sense message of today’s Scripture is clear: “You cannot serve God and wealth,” as Jesus says, just before launching into the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man.

Our God – who is faithful and just, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love – doesn’t work through coercion, shaming, or fear-mongering; the Lord knows those methods may produce short-term change. However, in the long run, they generate deep resistance to the freedom and joy and the *life that is really life* that Jesus offers. Coercion, shaming, and fear work against Jesus’ invitation to transformation, to repentance, to changing our hearts and minds. So instead of seeing these readings as a big warning to those of us who are rich, replete with the threat of eternal damnation, as some have interpreted Jesus’ parable –

perhaps the Spirit invites us to receive the “fullness of [God’s] grace,” as our collect says, so that we “may become partakers of [God’s] heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Maybe the tragedy of the Rich Man is less about him burning in Hades and more about the way he had constructed his life to be cut off from reality, from feeling compassion in the face of suffering, from the joy of sharing what we have, from the satisfaction of being able to see dignity and even beauty in the faces of those whom we might instinctually turn away from seeing, like a man with a dog licking his open sores.

Jesus is retelling a classic folktale of his era. We think it originated in Egypt and was told among Gentiles of Luke’s audience. And he uses a classic storytelling technique about an imaginary future to provoke a change in his listeners. Think here of the modern story *A Christmas Carol*. Dickens used the same technique, right? *A Christmas Carol* isn’t about the reality of ghosts, it is about the possibility of a stubborn, closed-in, old man’s conversion to generosity and joy. After his conversion, Scrooge says, “Men’s courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead. But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change.”

Jesus focuses very little attention on the afterlife through the Gospels, but he regularly uses images of the future to shake us up and help us become more conscious of how we are living now. He speaks about the kingdom of heaven, *not* as an ethereal destination where your soul goes after you die; it is, rather, how God intends *this* world to be when we have our priorities right and follow God’s will for our lives. Remember that line, “on earth as it is in heaven?”

On the one hand, Jesus’ parable affirms the moral of the folktale: Don’t be like the Rich Man...or else! But, on the other hand, a parable is a parable because there is always more meaning than just the plain sense. So perhaps some of “the more” in this parable is that God’s Kingdom has a special affinity for the least, lost, last, and lonely. And Lazarus certainly is among the least and last, but maybe the Rich Man is among the lost and lonely.

The Rich Man lives behind a wall with a gate. We know very little about him but that he dresses sharply and feasts sumptuously every day. Did he dine alone? The Rich Man, who is ironically nameless, knew Lazarus by name but didn’t help him. Did the Rich Man develop a sort of callus over his soul so that the plight of Lazarus would no longer affect him? Did he no longer even see Lazarus at the gate?

Maybe most of us have a little of the Rich Man in us. After all, we’re often glued to our screens, staring at social media or our bank balances or strings of texts related to our family’s emotional drama. All of that buffers us from noticing and being available to what actually *is*. Charles Taylor, the Catholic philosopher respected both within the academy and the church (which is a near miracle!), coined the term the “buffered self.” Taylor contrasts the buffered self with the porous self, a person who is open to the transcendent, to being encountered by reality that may be surprising, uncomfortable, and, of course, beyond our ability to control.

With the buffered self, the Holy Spirit works overtime to get our attention, to pull us out of ourselves. But, thank God, the Spirit does finally poke holes in our defenses. We might call those conversion processes. They are often painful, and it can feel like you're going through hell – or even Hades, for that matter. But it is only through the puncture of the buffers, the breaching of the walls, the opening of the gates, that mercy flows.

So, to stay with the imagery of the parable, while his death and confinement in Hades might have poked a few holes in the Rich Man's buffer, I suspect that the chasm between him and Lazarus will remain until he can see the full humanity of Lazarus, until the scope of his concern for others' wellbeing extends beyond his kith and kin.

But you know, while his brothers may be so buffered they won't be able to say "yes" to repentance, to the fullness of God's grace, to opening themselves to the miracle of someone rising from the dead, *hope abounds*. Because that chasm that separates the Rich Man and Lazarus in Hades is bridged by the One who spans the chasm between heaven and hell: Jesus. Of course, Jesus came to bring good news to the poor, to the last and lost like Lazarus. *And* he came to set the captive free, like the Rich Man captive to his wealth, likely lost and lonely, unable to engage reality.

Friends, Jesus invites us through this teaching to let our guards down, keep our gates unlocked, our ears unplugged, our eyes wide open, so that our souls may become less buffered and more and more porous to the flow of Spirit's generosity. Amen.

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