

When the Tables Get Turned

1 Timothy 6:6-19

Crossroads Christian Church

Luke 16:19-31

September 25, 2016 Pentecost 19C

People who think that the church talks about money too much really need to read the Gospel of Luke. Jesus talks about money all the time. It's no prosperity gospel, where God wants to make you rich. Rather, it's a call to use our resources wisely and lovingly to make a difference. Just last week we talked about the dishonest manager who creatively, if crookedly, got himself out of trouble for his dishonesty by using his assets creatively to make friends among his boss's debtors. I said that money makes a great servant, but a poor master. After Jesus told that parable, he and the Pharisees had another little tussle about their love of money. So what did Jesus do? He aggravated them even more by telling them another story. It's an uncomfortable story; one that not only made the Pharisees squirm, but it makes us squirm as well. In nearly fifty years of preaching, I've never once preached on this parable—I may have referred to it in a sermon, but it's never been my main text. I don't like to squirm, and I don't like to make other people squirm, as well. But Jesus said it, so it would be good to take it seriously.

The story begins by describing a rich man, who had a banquet every meal; and outside his door was a poor, starving man, Lazarus, who longed for the crumbs that would spill off of the rich man's table. High vs. low. Rich vs. poor. Comfortable vs. miserable. Self-satisfied vs. humble. Secure vs. desperate.

You can tell who Luke prefers by the fact he doesn't name the rich man but does name the poor man. Interesting—today, we know the names of the rich men—the Trumps, Buffets, Gates, but for us, the poor and suffering don't have names. They're anonymous. But for Jesus (and Luke), the rich man is anonymous; the poor man has a name.

By the way—just to avoid confusion, the Lazarus in the parable not the same guy as Lazarus who Jesus raised from the dead in John 11. It's just like at Crossroads, where we have multiple Pats, Mikes, Carols, Jills—so the New Testament has two Lazaruses. Lazari?

The story goes on. Both men die. The angels carry Lazarus up to Abraham's bosom, while the rich man—in later condition he's called "Dives," a Latin word for Rich, like Richie Rich the comic book character—anyway, the rich man goes to Gehenna. There is a place in a gully near Jerusalem that bears the name Gehenna, and it's literally the town dump, where fires would smolder consuming the city's trash. So Dives, the rich man, is thrown into a cosmic, spiritual dump heap, and is miserable. He's even more miserable when he sees Lazarus being welcomed by Abraham, their father in faith.

"Father Abraham!" he calls out. He pleads that Lazarus could come and bring him a sip of water. Abraham says, "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received good things, whereas Lazarus received terrible things. Now Lazarus is being comforted and you are in great pain. Moreover, a great crevasse has been fixed between us and you. Those who wish to cross over from here to you cannot. Neither can anyone cross from there to us." (Luke 16:25-26) The rich man asks if Lazarus can go back to life to warn the rich man's five brothers. Abraham says that they have all the warning they need in Moses and the Prophets—and even someone coming back from the dead wouldn't persuade them. Both the laws of Moses and the Prophets told people that they needed to take care of the poor and needy in their land; to share their crops with the hungry; to welcome the immigrants; to take care of the widows and orphans. But that rich dude? He'd never even paid attention. He'd never even noticed them from his side of the beautifully carved fine marble wall around his house.

He didn't mistreat Lazarus, he just didn't notice. Now it's time for my own confession. When I see a person with a "will work for food" sign at an intersection, I tend to look straight ahead, not making eye contact—just like the rich man did with Lazarus. O Dear. When I drive through North St Louis or East St Louis, I tend to look straight ahead—not to make eye contact; Just like the rich man did with Lazarus. O dear. As someone once said, "It's not what I don't understand about the Bible that gives me trouble, it's what I do understand."

This parable brought a memory back to the Rev Dr. Chris Tuttle, a Presbyterian minister: "On Spring Break in high school, Black Mountain Presbyterian Church, where I grew up, went to the Church of the Pilgrimage in Washington, DC. One evening they brought in a handful of homeless and formerly homeless men to tell us their stories. I still remember clearly a moment when one of my friends asked a man what to do when a person on the street approached him asking for money. He said that we should do what we felt like doing. If we give them money, be fully aware, he said, that it may be used for food, but just as well may be used for something else. He said to follow your gut as you make that decision. Then he added the critical point: *Say, 'yes,' or say, 'no,' but treat me like a person, he said. We spend our whole day not being seen. Do not act like we aren't there.*"¹ (unquote)

This parable, about a man who acted as if Lazarus were not there, is what's called a turnabout parable, where Jesus turned traditional values on their head. God's reign would turn human values upside down. Mary in her Magnificat sang about how God through Jesus would lift up the poor and

¹ Chris Tuttle, "Blindness and a Vision of Community," Day1.org, 2013.

bring down the rich and powerful. Jesus would say that to be a leader you have to be a servant.

To Luke and to Jesus, it wasn't a sin to be rich. Jesus loved the rich young ruler and was saddened when the young man couldn't follow his call. Jesus loved Zacchaeus, and was delighted and blessed when Zacchaeus accepted his invitation. Dives in this parable, and the rich fool who also was self-satisfied and built barns to accommodate his growing wealth, weren't condemned for being wealthy. They were condemned for making their wealth their god. They were condemned for hoarding their wealth, for not being generous to those in need.

Jesus, through Luke, wants us to have eyes to see. Jesus, through Luke, wants us to have hearts that reach out in love to tend to the needs of others. You at Crossroads have eyes that see; you have hearts that reach out to individuals in need, and I commend you for that. God blesses you for your generosity.

We live in a society, though, where the system is rigged against the Lazaruses of our age. The gap between rich and poor gets wider. Many businesses such as payday loans exist to suck up money from the poor. Human trafficking exploits and endangers poor women. School districts in poor areas can't give students the help they need to break the cycle of poverty. Governments, to save tax money, cut back on programs that can help. We use stereotypes and rationalizations that society teaches us that work just like the marble fence around Dives house.

Sarah Dylan Breuer puts it this way: "The hard word in this Sunday's gospel is that we have, in our fallen way of doing things, responded to poverty, sickness, age, vulnerability, and just plain difference by running away from those who remind us of what we fear. Since we can't run far or fast enough, we dig chasms between us. The poor live on one side of the tracks or the river or the freeway, and the rich on another." ²

So how can we make a difference? Our effort to help the food bank are a good start. Our helping people in crisis through the Good Samaritan Fund is a good start. This Sunday and next we are emphasizing Reconciliation, our Disciples program to fight racism and promote reconciliation. Several white churches I know are having honest conversations about race with black churches. Efforts like these make a positive difference that help us identify issues and respond to them. Poverty and racism are separate issues, but they are intertwined.

In our first scripture reading, Paul encourages Timothy to tell rich people in his congregation not to get swelled heads, and not to place their hope on their fortunes. Instead, he says that Timothy should "Tell them to do good,

² Sarah Dylan Breuer, Proper21 Year C, saralaughed.net.

to be rich in the good things they do, to be generous, and to share with others." (1 Timothy 6:18)

In parables like the story of the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus challenges us to be generous; to use our money, our time, and our efforts to help others. Jesus wants us to love God and to love our neighbor, but to do that, he says, we have to first see our neighbor; then, seeing, reach out and care. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon