

Sermon Text – Sunday, September 28, 2025 – Pastor Paula Kraus

1st Reading: Amos 6:1, 4-7; 2nd Reading: 1 Timothy 6:6-19
Scripture for the Message: Luke 16:19-31 – “Privilege”

When I read this parable I hear Jesus’ words from another setting, telling the rich young man he ought to give up his possessions to reach eternity. I hear him telling his disciples that it is “easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom.” Does Jesus hate riches? When we combine this with what Paul writes to Timothy, from our reading this morning, – “for the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil” – do we think the rich are doomed? I have heard these words used as way for the world to tell those living in poverty to be content with their plight “for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it.” On the other hand, I wonder if this parable is another of Jesus’ ways to teach the urgency of living right lives now. We don’t know the length of our days, and on this very day we could be asked to give an account of our lives. When taken in context with our other readings this morning, maybe it is a reminder of what happens when we focus on and trust worldly possessions over fully relying on God.

When I read these words, they remind me of the Dickens classic “A Christmas Carol.” Lazarus, the poor beggar [not to be confused with the Lazarus that Jesus raised from death] stands in for the part of Jacob Marley and the unnamed rich man is Scrooge – or at least it could play out that way. The difference in this parable is that Lazarus cannot be sent to the family of the unnamed rich man to warn them. In Jesus’ story the “great chasm has been fixed so that no one can cross over” death has closed the door and eliminated any opportunity for repentance. It’s too late for that poor unnamed rich man. Abraham, in this parable, tells this rich man that because of the choices he made in his life he was now beyond God’s help.

In fact, we can learn much from this parable when we put ourselves into the setting and try to hear what Jesus’ original audience might have heard. It’s hard to say if Jesus was talking only to his disciples or if this message was to the Pharisees who were probably listening in. For one thing we believe that the people of that time looked on riches as a sign of God’s favor – like our prosperity Gospel believers in this age. Believing that, we put ourselves into the place of the listeners and tell ourselves that this rich man must have been right with God because of the blessed life he was living. In contrast, poverty to them then would be a sign of God’s disfavor and begging a sign of God’s punishment for a sinful life.

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So, we, who are listening in, tell ourselves this man, Lazarus, must have done something in his life to warrant his current state of poverty and degradation.

Given those preconceptions, we can imagine astonishment when Jesus states that Lazarus was carried away by angels to be with Abraham, while the unnamed rich man was buried to be tormented in Hades. This was a divine twist of the expected outcome. Even the fact that the rich man was not given a name indicated a divine reversal of fortunes in this story. The first became last and the last first.

Given all this, what is this parable about, what is the message for his listeners and for us today? We don't know if Lazarus was some pious soul, he displays no pious actions in Jesus' account. It wasn't his impoverished state that punched his ticket to eternity because we know that those stuck in poverty can be just as sinful as anyone else. There is nothing outright in this story indicating a reason for this unexpected outcome. We don't know the level of either person's faith, we don't know if Lazarus did anything to "earn" his place beside Abraham. We do, however, know from the story what this rich person thought of his privileged status in life. So, we tell ourselves the rich person must be rich from ill-gotten gains, and he must have spent his life ignoring and mistreating the poor.

Jesus said he was dressed in purple and fine linen and feasted sumptuously every day. This rich man obviously wanted those less fortunate to notice his blessing his clothing symbolized wealth and status. His blessings must have been considerable because he didn't just have lavish meals occasionally, he feasted every day. We also learn from this parable that the rich man, even in death, felt he had earned special privileges. Notice he did not direct his plea for cool water to Lazarus but told Abraham to "send Lazarus." Even when he had suffered this reversal of fortune, even when he had to look up to see Abraham and Lazarus, he was arrogant enough to think that Lazarus was still beneath him and thus worthy only to serve his needs. That arrogance comes across again when he begs Abraham to "send Lazarus" to his brothers to warn them – because if they only knew what fate would await them, they would repent. As if his family deserved special divine privilege as well. The last statement of Abraham in our reading today is very prophetic – "if they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." "Even if someone rises from the dead" these words are coming from Jesus, think about that. What would it take to convince someone to repent and change the course of their life – an apparition, the resurrected Christ? Hear this people, the empty

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tomb does matter, but if we don't believe Jesus' teachings, his resurrection isn't going to save us.

I wonder if Jesus' message from this parable is that it matters what we do in life, death is too late to change. Our attitude toward our possessions matters, how we treat others matters. That message is clear from Paul's writing to Timothy – "in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains. But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness." Paul does not write to Timothy that money is evil, and Jesus does not say in this parable that money is evil – but that the love of money is a root of evil. Jesus, in this parable, suggests that it is not his riches that put the rich man in hades but his failure to use his wealth as an opportunity to perform works of generosity.

This rich man refused to give alms, even when a poor man, Lazarus, was at his gate – for that failure he will suffer in the afterlife. There was no "love of neighbor" exhibited in this man's life. The rich man did not store up treasures for himself for the future, instead he enjoyed all he had in this life thus having no treasure left for eternity. As Paul writes – you can take nothing out of this world.

This is not a message against wealth, nor is it a message about "good news to the poor." It can however be a message of hope because with it comes a warning to us. Even though Abraham tells the rich man that the chasm between them is fixed, it is fixed in death not in life. In life there are numerous opportunities to 'listen' to the warnings. We not only have Jesus' teachings but also the lessons from our Old Testament that tell of God's relationship with God's people. The hope for us is that God's grace does not rely on our ability to deserve or earn it. The hope for us is that we do not have to suffer a reversal of fortune for ourselves if we do what God requires of us in this life. If we build for ourselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future. If we do this, then blessings will come from an abundantly gracious God.

Listening to what Paul writes to Timothy – "as for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment." Do good, be generous, live right lives – these are the messages we have heard over the past couple of weeks.

The message of hope for the church is to follow Jesus' teachings, allow others to 'hear' God's word through Jesus' teachings. Seek to obey God's will by caring for the poor; we most certainly are our brothers' and sisters' keepers. The

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church cannot expend all it has on itself because then there will be nothing left in our heavenly treasury. The church must be willing to continue Jesus' work of doing justice in our world – in the case of this parable justice did not necessarily mean a reversal of fortune but maybe when we realize that Lazarus was ignored in life and in death by the rich man who refused to give alms and thought only of his needs, justice prevailed – at least in our eyes.

So, the lesson in this parable is that we should think about our priorities, live right lives now before there is no time left for us to store up riches for our futures. We should adopt an appropriate attitude toward possessions not letting our possessions possess us. Our work, as Christians, should include seeking good for others and not building up storehouses of worldly things. Use your wealth in service of God's kingdom building for yourself treasures in heaven.

I wonder if what we can take home from this message is the fact that we don't do God's work to get paid in the world's treasure but to reap a reward far greater than anything available to us this side of heaven. I wonder if we might realize that putting ourselves first creates a negative balance in our eternal bank accounts. The world's riches are fleeting, ask anyone who labors for a living, you can spend hours of sweat equity and never get what you think you deserve. God knows our true worth and rewards us in ways far beyond what we deserve when what we do is for God's glory and not our own. We should probably acknowledge our privileges in this world and consider the plight of those who we do not allow to have status or privilege.