

## “Sharing Crumbs Ain’t Enough”

A Sermon based on Luke 16:19-31  
Delivered at the First Presbyterian Church, Urbana  
on Sunday, September 29<sup>th</sup>, 2019  
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What a difference a week makes. Last Sunday, we explored one of the most challenging parables, challenging because it seemed so obscure and unclear. This week we have an equally challenging parable, but this time the challenge is that it is all too clear. It very clearly seems to suggest that if we hoard wealth in this life, we can count on suffering unpleasant consequences in the next.

One of the ways that we Christians deal with this kind uncomfortable clarity is with humor. If we can bring ourselves to laugh about these hard things Jesus so often said, then maybe we can figure out how to be faithful, faithful even with the thing we so rarely talk about: money. All of the Catholic religious orders revel in this kind of humor. Benedictines, Dominicans, Jesuits, Franciscans all relish good jokes about each other, especially jokes about money.

One of the jokes about the Franciscans says that they are the only order that set out to do good and ended up doing well. Not even Jesus, it is said, knows how much money the Franciscans have.

The rich man in our parable for today may have been similar. No one knew how much money he had. All that was known was that he had tons of it. And although he obviously was no Franciscan in setting out to do good, he did at least share the crumbs from his table with poor Lazarus. You have to at least give the rich man credit for that.

What the rich man came to realize is this: sharing crumbs ain’t enough. This discovery is part of what he wanted to pass on to his five brothers, so that they might do better.

But there is something else I want us to understand today. The parable we have before us about the rich man and Lazarus can be read as a story about the importance of seeing. Specifically, the rich man provides us with an example of

how wealth can curtain the windows of our hearts and minds. Wealth can cause blindness. And the things wealth blinds us to are the very things we need to see.

In the last month or so, we've been hearing quite a bit from Luke about material possessions and wealth. In the parable of the rich fool, we saw how wealth can be deceptive. The fool had an exceptionally good year. And he said, "What am I to do? I'll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. I'll eat, drink and take my ease, for I have much laid up for the future."

He thought he had it all made. He was set forever. But that night, the fool's soul was required of him, and he died. And God said to him, "Whose will all of this be?" The fool was deceived because he believed that his wealth carried with it some kind of security. He discovered that wealth offers no ultimate security.

In other parables and events we have heard Jesus' teachings about the potential to make an idol of our wealth, about the importance of seeing to the needs of the poor, and the importance of giving to others in a righteous manner. We should not give to draw attention to ourselves, and we should not give in a way that belittles the poor. Today, we reach the pinnacle of these teachings in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus.

So for more than a month, the Gospel lessons have focused on wealth. Why? Why all of this concern given to material possessions?

Well, some argue that it has to do with Luke's church. The community for which Luke wrote either was made up of predominantly rich people, who needed to be reminded of their obligations to the poor, or the community was about equally divided between rich and poor, and that near balance was causing some tension. No one knows with any certainty.

What is clear for us are the implications of Jesus' teachings. At the heart of the Gospel is the great reversal. The people who were no people become God's people. Nobodies become somebodies. The old is made new. The first become last. The last become first. The rich and the powerful, who so often see no need of God's grace, are cut off from the people of God, while the poor, the lowly, the outcasts are given a proper place in the household of faith.

The promise, and the challenge, of the Gospel is that God reverses social and economic realities in surprising ways. Nowhere is this reversal seen more vividly than in this parable of the rich man and Lazarus.

## II

There are two themes that I want to develop this morning. The first one dominates from the very beginning: the changed circumstances of the primary characters.

The contrast could not be more sharply drawn. The rich man is very rich. Lazarus is expendable. The rich man dressed in purple, and had a huge wardrobe. More clothes than Liberace. More bling than a rap musician. And Feasts. Sumptuous, extravagant feasts. Every day. The portrait is one of a man who is fabulously wealthy, who enjoys nothing more than conspicuously displaying his wealth.

Then there is Lazarus. He is described in very ugly terms, terms we would rather not hear. He is covered with sores. Who knows how well he could get around. Likely not well. As for clothes, he likely has a bare minimum of rags. As for food, he is hungry. He longs for nothing more than to fill himself with the crumbs that fall from the rich man's table.

At that time, there were no napkins. When people were eating, the custom was to wipe their hands on something like pita bread, which was then discarded. That is what Lazarus hungered to have, those scraps of bread that the rich used to wipe their hands. That dogs lick his sores tells us that he is religiously unclean. He is an outcast.

Jesus tells us that they both die. And it is only after the death of each, and the great reversal, that we begin to understand the rich man's problem. Let us be clear about how the rich man is described. He is not harshly condemned. He is not condemned because he is rich, as if there is something inherently wrong with having money. We are not told that the rich man persecuted Lazarus, that he refused him food or tried to get rid of him.

The clue to the rich man's problem comes in verse 23. It is in this verse, after both have died, that the rich man sees Lazarus for the first time. While both

were living, while Lazarus languished and suffered at the rich man's gate, it seems the rich man never saw Lazarus. It's not that he didn't acknowledge him. He never even saw him.

This, very vividly, portrays one danger of wealth: wealth can cause blindness. It seems that the rich man's wealth, his sumptuous lifestyle, so distorts his vision that he is unable to perceive the plight of Lazarus. He is unable to identify with his predicament. He is unable to appreciate his suffering. The rich man is blind to the humanity of Lazarus. He doesn't see him.

That is what wealth can do to you. Prosperity has a way of limiting our perspective, of closing the shades on what is distasteful to us, so that we are not disturbed. Wealth puts walls and gates around the houses of our hearts and minds.

And so, the great reversal happens. As the rich man calls out from Hades to Father Abraham, we are reminded of how John the Baptist instructed the crowds not to claim Abraham as a Father so glibly. One wonders if the rich man ever called on Abraham while he was alive.

Now, all of the pleas of the rich man are resisted. So thoroughly has wealth curtailed his vision, even in his torment, the rich man sees Lazarus as no more than a servant, a messenger boy who can be sent on an errand. He still doesn't see him as a brother, as kin. Sadly, it seems the rich man is beyond repentance. Lazarus, however, is beside Abraham, enjoying the comfort he never had in life.

### III

It is at this point that we find the other theme I want to touch on. The rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus back to his brothers to warn them about what has happened. His request is denied.

It is denied because his brothers already have the teachings of Moses and of the prophets. They already have all they need to know, all that they need to guide them in a way of living that will save them from the torment the rich man suffers.

The scriptures are central, more important than some miracle we might see, more important than someone coming back from the dead. What Luke would have us understand is that all of these scriptures were fulfilled in Jesus. These scriptures are filled with instruction on how those who have much are to care for those who have little. Jesus embodied these teachings with his life. He was rich, and he became poor so that we might have life.

Abraham tells the rich man that if his brothers will not listen to Moses and the prophets, then they will not listen to anything, not even the miraculous. A very real link is established here between Moses and the prophets, and Jesus, and the Church. We are part of that witness. People should be able to look to us to understand. They should be able to look to us and see that we are a community who cares about the poor. We are a community of people who really see the poor, and who welcome them, care for them, and advocate for them. We are the community of the great reversals. With our lives we are to show what it means to really see.

For us, this may be a hard parable. So much of what we have heard from Jesus in recent weeks has been hard. What makes this parable hard, among other things, is the difficulty in identifying with either the rich man or Lazarus. None of us are fabulously wealthy like the rich man. And none of us are utterly destitute like Lazarus.

How then can this parable really speak to us? Maybe it can speak to us through the five brothers. Maybe we can identify ourselves with them. Like them, none of us have died yet. So maybe, like the brothers, there is still time for us, to understand what the rich man would have us know.

The rich man would want us to see, to really see, even those at our gates who we might no longer see as real human beings. Can we see the poor as people, not as welfare mothers, or drunks or drug addicts or criminals or the homeless or mentally ill or whatever condition? Do we really see them?

To all of us the rich man says, open your eyes, while there is still time. And one other thing: you probably will want to share more than crumbs. We

should hear what Timothy heard. Do good, and stop worrying about doing well.  
Amen.