

Epworth Chapel on the Green
September 29, 2013
Pentecost 19
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Amos 6:1-7
Psalm 146
I Timothy 6:11-19
Luke 16:19-31

Our Gospel lesson for this morning has come to be known as the parable of the Rich man and Lazarus. It follows immediately after our text from last week, the parable of the dishonest steward.

The audience for this story is the Pharisees, who are described by Luke prior to the beginning of the story as “lovers of money.”

But the Pharisees’ love of money was not just a love of wealth for its own sake. The Pharisees’ love of money was a carefully crafted part of their theology, a theology derived from their reading of the Old Testament Scriptures.

The Pharisees read passages like Deuteronomy 28, which states that if you obey God you will be blessed in the marketplace, in war, in the field, and at home. They read texts like Psalm 1, where it says that the righteous person prospers in all that he does, and they devised a simple formula where wealth was the sign of God's blessing that resulted from obeying God’s commands. The Pharisees then used this as a foundation to justify a life of greed and avarice.

Jesus comes along, however, and as he often does, throws a monkey wrench into our good theology. He has just indicated a few verses earlier that one cannot

serve God and money. But now he needs a way to drive this point home to the Pharisees. He needs a vivid and dramatic way to show them that their love of money and their theology of wealth is a gross misreading of their own Scriptures.

So what does he do? He tells a story. A parable.

In the story, the contrast is sharp and the details are vivid. The rich man lives in complete luxury. Similar to the people to whom Amos writes, this man's life is a daily banquet at a bounteous table. They enjoy lives of garish and opulent indulgence while people around them are starving and being sold into slavery. Nothing about this man even hints of need in any way.

At his door is a poor man, Lazarus. Unlike the rich man, Lazarus is clothed only with open, oozing sores. He squats among the dogs, gaunt, hollow-eyed, and famished. *Lazarus* is the only name given to anyone in Jesus' parables. The name means "God has helped."

Both men die, and only the rich man is given a burial. But in death, their roles are now reversed. Lazarus finds himself an honored guest at the messianic banquet, while the rich man lies in anguish in the flames of Hades (Old Testament, Sheol). The condition of both men is now unalterably final.

Many have read this parable and concluded that it is a story of how the rich go to hell and the poor go to heaven. Others have read in it a detailed commentary on the afterlife. Both readings of this text are too superficial. For this is primarily

a story about how we steward money and material resources *in the light of our own sacred Scriptures.*

Notice the second part of the story in vv. 27-31. The rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus to his family to warn them about his torment. But Abraham replies, “Moses and the prophets have warned them. They can read their writings anytime they want to.”

What has happened here? What has happened is that this rich man has missed the Word of God that came to him from his own Scriptures. In his own Scriptures he had read these words: “You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor in the land.” (Deut. 15:7-11)

In his own Scriptures, the Law of Moses made it clear that the harvest of his fields was to be shared with the poor and the transient (Lev. 19:9-10). The prophets were also very clear about this. Isaiah says:

I want you to share your food with the hungry and to welcome poor wanderers into your homes. Give clothes to those who need them, and do not hide from relatives who need your help...Stop oppressing the helpless and stop making false accusations and spreading vicious rumors. Feed the hungry and help those in trouble. [Is. 58:7-8]

But this man’s love of money twisted his perspective, so much so that the *Word of the Lord came to him from his own Scriptures and he missed it.*

So now he thinks it will take something more to spare his family, something miraculous like someone rising from the dead.

But he is told that if his family won't listen to Moses and the prophets, they won't listen even if someone rises from the dead.

What, then, is this parable saying, and what is it saying to us today?

Every sermon I've ever heard on this story has invited me to identify with either Lazarus or the rich man. I'd like you to consider another option this morning. I'd like to invite you to identify with the rich man's five brothers. Unlike Lazarus and the rich man in the story, their destiny is still being determined, their story is still being written. As is ours.

Like them, we have the sacred Scriptures. We have the Law and the Prophets, which clearly show us God's unrelenting care and compassion for the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized in our midst. But we are privileged to have something else, something the rich man's brothers did not have. **We have been visited by someone who was raised from the dead.**

We have seen a man put to death for caring for the poor, for announcing God's mercy for all, for daring to forgive the sins of the outcasts. And we have heard the testimony that this man was raised from the dead and vindicated by God for doing so.

We have the Law and the Prophets. But God has also sent us a man raised from the dead to quicken us, to awaken us, to inspire us to open our hearts and

hands and wallets so that the church might be a little outpost of God's Kingdom right here in Boise, Idaho.

We have been encountered by a man raised from death, whose love compels us to be rich in good works, to give generously to those who are in need, to store up treasure in heaven.

In a world that likes to *love* things and *use* people, we've been encountered by a man raised from the dead, and the nail prints in his hands remind us that God's formula is *using* things, and *loving* people.

The rich man did not end up tormented in Hades because he was rich *per se*. He ended up tormented in Hades because *Jesus appeared to him every day at his doorstep in the face of a starving man, inviting him to live his own Scriptures by opening his heart and acting compassionately*. But instead, he used his own Scriptures to justify *not helping* this man, and in so doing missed the kingdom of God in his midst.

And like this rich man, all of us here today are not *owners*, but *stewards*. As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, we are (as individuals and as a congregation) faced with an important question: *What are we doing with what we have been given?* And what will we do with the grace we are about to receive here?

As you come to the Lord's Table, come with thanksgiving for the fact that even as you *freely receive* God's grace in Christ, the Spirit is at work in you, helping you to *freely give* that grace to others. As you do, you will find the Kingdom of God drawing near.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.