

The need for the rich to take care of the poor is a constant theme in the gospel of Luke. In many of Jesus' teachings in Luke's gospel we hear him give advice to people of wealth and social position. He says they should not take the seats of honor at feasts, they should invite the poor and marginalized to their lavish feasts rather than their elite friends and family and folks who can return the invitation. He suggests considering selling all one's possessions and redistribute the proceeds to the poor. He commends one for giving half his possessions to the poor and making restitution to those he defrauded. He shames the rich who contribute gifts to the Temple from their wealth, while a poor widow gives all she has, for she sacrifices too much and they give relatively little. The need for the rich to take care of the poor is a constant theme in the gospel of Luke. Unlike most politicians today who focus in the so-called middle class, as if they are the most important demographic, Jesus is concerned with the poor, the sick, the marginalized. As wealth becomes concentrated in the top one or two percent of our population, masses live in poverty, and Jesus attempts to raise the consciousness of the rich about poverty, compassion, and social inequality.

Now it's important to note that this has nothing to do with actually having wealth. After all, Abraham, the one who ends up holding Lazarus close to him in heaven was quite a rich man himself. So were King David, King Solomon, even Zacchaeus, the man who had a change of heart after Jesus came over to his house one day, was wealthy. There is no difference between rich and poor to God. The question that matters revolves around how one handles the means that are put at one's disposal.

We hear this emphasis in the fierce warning Amos addresses to the people of his time in our first lesson, "Woe to you who are complacent in Zion...You lie on beds inlaid with ivory and lounge on your couches. You dine on choice lambs and fattened calves...You drink wine by the bowlful and use the finest lotions, but you do not grieve over the ruin of my people. Therefore you will be among the first to go into exile; your feasting and lounging will end." Amos is claiming, the rich are complacent and selfish, and do not recognize the danger into which they place themselves when they ignore justice and trample on the needs of the poor.

The second lesson give us the same warning; "People who want to get rich fall into temptation, and a trap, and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. This is a theme that runs heavily throughout the whole of scripture: We are to use what we have with wisdom, for it is a means that God places at our disposal for serving him, through his needy children.

Which brings us to our parable for today. In our parable, the rich man is anonymous, he wears purple attire made of fine linen, which is the color of royalty and is of high social

status. He eats as lavishly as he dresses, as do other elites and rich people. As he feasts and wears expensive clothing in his gated house, a poor hungry man languishes at the base of the rich man's gate. His name is Lazarus. Naming him humanizes him. Perhaps leaving the rich man nameless signifies how love of wealth over love of people dehumanizes and desensitizes people to other's suffering, so that lower status people can be treated with indifference, hatred, even cruelty.

Nevertheless, Lazarus hopes to eat at least the crumbs and leftovers from the rich man's feasts. But a society desensitized to suffering and hunger would rather have pets than human beings eat the leftovers. And in our story the dogs eat the scraps, the dogs get to eat, and yet Lazarus goes hungry. The rich man never even thought of giving to or lifting up the poor on the streets. He never thought of putting salve on the wounds of a poor man like Lazarus. Only the dogs show mercy on Lazarus, licking his sore-covered body. I'm sure Lazarus hoped that perhaps this day would be different, perhaps today he might get the food, the medical care, the compassion he so desperately needed.

There are countless Lazarus' today that are hoping that perhaps today will be different. Now Lazarus isn't going to be dropped off at my door, not where I live, and if he is, the police will come and take him away. But if we don't take the time to look we may never see the poor and needy even if they fill the world around us.

Here at Holy Spirit we see the poor and needy and we have a long history of responding with care and resources and compassion. We're about collecting food for the COOL food pantry, volunteering at PADS, raising money for world hunger, refugee one, Curt's Café, Crop Walk, LSSI, and many other needs. We are a generous congregation and yet our attention is still required for there are so many ways in which we can care for Lazarus. Do you realize how many people die from disease simply because they don't have clean water? I was reading the other day that Lutheran World Relief can provide an emergency water filter, for those coping with disaster for just \$35, and a whole irrigation system to a community for \$2,500. Think of the lives that can be spared. I remember when the ELCA was on their big malaria campaign, and they reached their goal of 10 million dollars over 4 years, and they calculated that with every dollar spent, one life was saved. It was hard to imagine that you could have such an impact.

This past year our church was honored for being one of the most generous congregations by ELCA World Hunger. Mary Detjen and I were invited to attend the World Hunger gathering in Minneapolis this summer, and we heard some incredible stories about the impact our dollars are having. Countries like Rwanda that were destroyed by civil war are being rebuilt by Lutherans who are donating a goat or a pig or a dozen chicks, or a brick making machine. And we've been invited to become "Go Beyond" congregation that gets aligned with a specific project to make an incredible difference in the lives of God's people. And we've been invited to do the because we are a "Go Beyond" congregation.

But, you know, I've heard some people say the church is always asking for money. Isn't it great that we're always asking for money? What kind of a church would we be if we weren't always reaching out to help others in need? What kind of a church would we be if weren't always trying to find new ways to share the gospel of Jesus Christ? What better place could there possibly be for people to open the wallets and purses and share from the gifts we've been given.

Well, as our parable for today concludes, both the rich man and Lazarus die, as all do. But neither our social status, nor our poverty or wealth, accompany us. Lazarus goes to heaven and the rich man ends up in hell. Lazarus is comforted and the rich man is in agony. And an insurmountable chasm separates the once rich man from those who would help him. It's too late for the rich man to change his fate, but as he burned in the fires of hell he wanted to send someone back to his brothers to warn them, to get them to change the way they live their lives. But Father Abraham says, "No" They have the Bible. They have the prophets. That is enough. And we are left with this vision of eternal judgment, and it is a powerful message about our obedience to God.

Like Lazarus, we too are beggars, poor, and dependent on God. And we confess, we cannot by our own reason and strength, even believe in Jesus Christ our Lord or come to him. We are only made right with God by grace through faith in our Lord Jesus. We are saved by grace.

So let me leave you with another vision, a vision given to the song writer Ray Boltz that inspired the song he wrote. It's a beautiful song, but I think the lyrics read like a poem. The song is entitled "Thank you".

I dreamed I went to heaven
And you were there with me
We walked upon the streets of gold
Beside the crystal sea
We heard the angels singing
Then someone called your name
We turned and saw a young man running
And he was smiling as he came

And he said, Friend, you may not know me now
Then he said, but wait
You used to teach my Sunday School
When I was only eight
And every week you would say a prayer
Before the class would start
And one day when you said that prayer
I asked Jesus in my heart.

Thank you for giving to the Lord
I am a life that was changed

Thank you for giving to the Lord
I am so glad you gave.

Then another man stood before you
And said, Remember the time
A missionary came to your church
And his pictures made you cry
You didn't have much money
But you gave it anyway
Jesus took the gift you gave
And that's why I'm here today

Thank you for giving to the Lord
I am a life that was changed
Thank you for giving to the Lord
I am so glad you gave

One by one they came
Far as the eye could see
Each life somehow touched
By your generosity
Little things that you had done
Sacrifices made
Unnoticed on the earth
In heaven, now proclaimed

And I know up in heaven
You're not supposed to cry
But I'm almost sure
There were tears in your eyes
As Jesus took your hand
And you stood before the Lord
He said, "My child, look around you
Great is your reward.

Thank you for giving to the Lord
I am a life that was changed
Thank you for giving to the Lord
I am so glad you gave

Amen.