

Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

[Lazarus and the Rich Man, Luke 16:19-31](#)

The Christian faith is sometimes a faith of contrasts. And those contrasts often require us to make difficult choices that carry weighty consequences. In the Scriptures we find, for example, the contrasts between living in the domain of darkness and living in the domain of light, between walking the path of wisdom and walking the path of folly, between following the way of death and following the way of life, and between pursuing the path of salvation and pursuing the path of damnation. Jesus in his sermon on the mount, as recorded in the Gospel of Luke chapter 6, sets forth a number of very concrete contrasts: between those that are poor and those that are rich, those that are hungry and those that are full, those that weep and those that laugh, those that are sick and those that are healthy, and those that are ostracized and those that are well accepted.

Our gospel reading for today, which is also in the gospel of Luke, drops us into the middle of two of those crucial contrasts: (a) between the rich and the poor, and (b) between life here and life hereafter. But what's particularly interesting about our gospel reading is how these two sets of contrasts intermingle with one another. And what's challenging is how we as individuals and as church institutions should respond.

The parable places two contrasting figures front and center: there's a rich man and there's a poor man. The rich man is presented as dressing in expensive clothing and eating great amounts of food, living for all intents and purposes a life of comfort. The poor Lazarus, however, is presented in a miserable state, lying at the rich man's gate covered with sores and starving. When both die, however, the parable presents them in polar opposite lights. Lazarus is now presented as being in a state of comfort, while the rich man is presented in a state of agony. And their states in the afterlife are presented as being *the result* of their states in this life: *because* the rich man lived in comfort here he is in agony in the hereafter, and *because* the poor Lazarus was in agony here, he is in comfort in the hereafter. How should we understand this connection?

It is first worth noting how in the presentation of the rich man, he isn't explicitly described as doing anything harmful to the poor man Lazarus. There's no sense that the rich man abused Lazarus, spoke scornfully against Lazarus, condemned Lazarus, or mistreated him in any way. The rich man seems to be condemned simply because of his wealth. The same goes with Lazarus but on the flip side: Lazarus is not presented as being any more righteous in faith, more obedient to the law, more loving of God, or more holy in any way. The poor Lazarus seems to obtain paradise simply because of his poverty.

This stark, unqualified contrast between the rich and poor is consistent with how Luke presents Jesus's teaching throughout his gospel. It is widely accepted that Luke, more than Matthew and Mark, has a special concern for the connection between someone's wealth and someone's standing before God. Recall the Sermon on the Mount as presented in Luke: Jesus teaches "blessed are the poor" without qualification, as opposed to how Matthew presents it, which has Jesus teaching, "blessed are the poor *in spirit*." Almost to up the ante, Luke also records Jesus teaches a list of "woe to those", which are not found in Matthew, with the first being "woe to you who are rich," and this again without qualification.

When you read through Luke's gospel, it's almost as if Luke knew of folk who were justifying their abundance of wealth by turning the issue away from the wealth itself to focus on the condition of the heart — that it's the *love* of wealth, not simply possessing great amounts of wealth that is the problem. And certainly, there's Scripture that focuses on the heart as an issue in having wealth. I Timothy 6:10 famously states, "The *love* of money is the root of all evils" (NRSV). Luke, however, by not spiritualizing richness and poverty and by not simply focusing on the heart seems to challenge us with a harder question: is it even possible for a person to possess great amounts of wealth and *not* have a heart issue? Luke wants us to ponder this question ... deeply. He wants us to feel the possible peril of possessing great amounts of wealth. He wants us to take seriously Jesus's teaching: "It is easier for a camel to go through an eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven" (Luke 18:25, NRSV).

Let us be clear on what we're addressing here. The issue in Luke seems to be the *accumulation* of wealth and possessions due to wealth. The issue seems to be when the transference of wealth stops with us and our spending. The description of the rich man in the parable, you recall, does not focus on the fact that he makes a lot of money or has a high income, that is, the issue doesn't seem to be that large amounts of wealth come his way. The description focuses, rather, on what he's done with that wealth to benefit himself: he dresses in what were in Luke's time expensive items like purple clothing and fine linen, and he consumes large amounts of food every day. It should not bypass our attention that poor Lazarus is in his miserable condition *laying at the rich man's gate*. The parable seems to imply that poor Lazarus's condition wouldn't be what it is if the rich man were a conduit of blessing to Lazarus, rather than simply blessing himself. What the parable seems to teach, then, is that those who use their wealth to create "the good life" for themselves here on earth will not be able to possess the true good life in the hereafter, for those who are creating the good life here on earth have wealth as their true treasure rather than God. But those that are a conduit of wealth to benefit others have their hearts set on the true treasure of God and the true life to come.

When we return to I Timothy 6, where Paul speaks of the “love of money,” he goes on to suggest how to ensure that such love does not exist. He writes, “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. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life” (I Tim 6: 17:19, NRSV). When great wealth comes our way, Paul suggests the way not to love it is by giving it away to the benefit of others. And if you do this, your treasure will be in its proper place, with God and the life that is *really life*.

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus is indeed a challenging parable about wealth and poverty, and the connection between wealth and poverty and the life here and the life hereafter. Jesus calls us to think deeply about our handling of wealth. As individuals and as institutions, we have to ask ourselves the question: who are the poor sitting at our gates and are we being conduits of blessing? Or are we making ourselves the object of our blessing? Are we attempting to build a life of comfort here on earth? Or are we investing in the true treasure of the fullness of life to come?

For scripture to live as it should, we have to invite its challenge to our day. May we search for Lazarus where he can be found today and share our blessings. In the uninsured seeking health care, the immigrant looking for shelter, in those without adequate housing or food, and all the vulnerable and marginalized, may we see Lazarus, may we see Christ and be moved. Let us go forth in the Spirit to fight against being possessed by wealth and instead use wealth as a way to serve God and bless others.