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St. James', Mt. Airy  
9/29/19

Pentecost 16/Proper 21C  
Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15  
Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16

1 Timothy 6:6-19  
Luke 16:19-31

Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;  
take our hands and work through them;  
take our hearts and set them on fire.  
Amen.

Last week's Gospel parable about the wise use of "dishonest wealth" ended with this warning: *You cannot serve God and wealth.* It is just as stark a warning for us as it was for those who heard it directly from Jesus' lips.

It's easy to read it and then write it off as a good scriptural one-liner, and then go on living our lives. But that gets harder when we recognize that the overall theme of economic generosity and justice is at the heart of Luke's gospel.

It is Luke who reports that Jesus is born in a makeshift shelter in a poor, backwater town. It is Luke who features Mary's song celebrating how God "fills the hungry with good things, and sends the rich away empty." It's Luke who declares that Jesus describes his mission first and foremost "to bring good news to the poor" – and then later, in the Sermon on the Plain, says both "Blessed are you who are poor" and "Woe to you who are rich."

It's Luke, too, who includes Jesus' stories of the rich fool who builds ever-larger barns; the rich ruler who turns away from discipleship because "he was very rich;" and the story of Zacchaeus, the rich tax collector who promises Jesus he will give half his fortune to the poor and pay reparations to those he's defrauded. And it's Luke, as we saw last week, who underlines that what we do with our money is an important indicator of our spiritual maturity, or lack thereof. Accordingly, in the Book of Acts, Luke writes that the earliest Christian communities pooled and shared resources, eschewing the whole idea of personal wealth.

This isn't a side show in Luke's Gospel, but rather a consistent, organizing theme: *You cannot serve God and wealth*. In the midst of all this comes today's story of the rich man and Lazarus, a stark warning about the choice to serve wealth, or to serve God through serving others.

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Today's parable is all about reversals. The poor man is named (and is in fact the only person named in any of the parables), while the rich man is not. The rich man is dressed in purple, while the poor man is "dressed in sores." The rich man feasts sumptuously, while Lazarus longs to be satisfied with what falls from the table. The rich man has a proper burial, while Lazarus is carried away by angels. By the end of the story, Lazarus, the poor man, is looking down from heaven, and the rich man is the one looking up, begging.

This reversal of fortunes is a common theme in Luke's gospel, but the duality presented between rich and poor is not just about the eschatological balancing of the scales of justice: it presents us with the moral challenge of seeing, then making visible, the invisible suffering of the world.

As Biblical scholar John Donahue points out, "One of the prime dangers of wealth is that it causes blindness." The rich man is not depicted as an evil person; he simply **did not see** the man at his gate.

Never having to see the poor – the OTHER of any type – is a privilege afforded by, well, privilege. And it is frankly a terrible privilege to be able to choose what to see and what not to see.

We do this in so many ways. It can be as simple as averting our eyes when we see a panhandler, and as profound as our choice of where we live or what parts of town we drive through.

Because like it or not, and whether you consider yourself rich or not, all of us gathered here today have more in common with the rich man than with Lazarus. This parable is a warning for us, that if we do not cross the chasm between rich and poor, between **us** and all the **other them**s we separate ourselves from in this life – we will surely not be able to cross it in the next.

These boundaries we create don't just separate us from one another, they separate us from God. Remember this other story from Luke:

*Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?'<sup>26</sup> He said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?'<sup>27</sup> He answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.'<sup>28</sup> And he said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.'*

*<sup>29</sup>But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'<sup>30</sup> Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.<sup>31</sup> Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.<sup>32</sup> So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.<sup>33</sup> But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.<sup>34</sup> He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of*

*him. <sup>35</sup>The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, “Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.” <sup>36</sup>Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?’ <sup>37</sup>He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’*

Luke weaves these themes economic justice, the promise of reversals, and how we treat one another together to show us what it means to live as a Christ follower in the here and now. And as long as we are content to stay in the safety of our choice to not see the suffering of others, for as long as we ignore their cries of anguish, we are condemning ourselves.

But if we have ears to hear, and eyes to see, and hearts that are open and not hardened – we will change, and we will work for change.

This is the sacrament of discomfort: making outwardly visible those things that would be invisible if we let them stay that way.

And so, we will bring food to fill the pantry at Mt. Airy Net, and we must ask the hard questions about an economic system that benefits from the working poor.

We will stand in our places of privilege and listen to the stories of those who are different than us, and accept that we can’t tell others how to feel about their experience just to make ourselves comfortable.

We will search within our hearts for the walls we have created, and we will ask God to help us pull them down stone by stone, board by board, until our hearts are free to love as God loves us.

Theologian Richard Rohr offers it this way: “The Reign of God has much more to do with right relationship than with being privately right. It has much more to do with being

connected than with being personally correct. Can you feel the total difference between these two? The one encourages an impossible notion of individual salvation and creates individualists, the other introduces cosmic salvation and creates humans, citizens, caretakers, neighbors, and saints.”

My prayer is that we do the hard work of choosing to be humans, citizens, caretakers, neighbors, and saints.

~ Amen ~

Salt Project Lectionary Commentary

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G. Penny Nixon, Homiletical Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year C Volume 4*.

Scott Bader-Saye, Theological Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year C Volume 4*.

Charles B. Cousar, Exegetical Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year C Volume 4*.

G. Penny Nixon, Homiletical Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year C Volume 4*.