

September 30, 2007

Scripture readings: Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15; Luke 16:19-31

Sermon title: "Investing in Heaven"

Wow, the Bible pays a lot of attention to money and material possessions! It says all kinds of things about the delusions that wealth can bring, and about how people have a tendency to create idols out of our things, our possessions. It points repeatedly to the poor and the landless, the destitute. The Bible asks all kinds of impertinent questions about how we earn our wealth, and about how we use or invest or spend our money. It doesn't try to be polite about it, either. It's pretty nosy about our lifestyles.

Isn't it funny, though, how people tend to hear those repeated passages, and say, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, we've heard that lots of times," and somehow a type of mental blackout curtain is quickly pulled across that part of the Bible. Instead, a very curious thing happens. Those who like to pontificate supposedly literal understandings of the Bible don't say a whole lot about how we handle our money and possessions. To listen to the current mode of what is thought to be "Biblical teaching," one would think that every page of the Bible has something to say about human sexuality, or about the proper role of women. One would think that the Bible is all about a certain genetic strain of humanity, a small segment of people set aside, having a divine right to bully their way into possession of a strategic part of the land of the Middle East, and don't anybody get in their way if they dispossess the folks that have lived there for thousands of years.

There are all kinds of things that one could be led to think that the Bible tells us to do. But money? Well, we're not in such a rush to hear what the Bible has to say about these things. If a preacher speaks about money as the Bible speaks about it, then that preacher is likely to be written off as "talking too much about money all the time!" "Preacher, tell us something that will allow us to point our fingers at people who aren't like us! Enough of this stuff about money. It's none of your business what we do with our money." Or, "Preacher, we don't want to hear about all that obvious stuff. Give to the poor, blah, blah. Tell us something that will make us furrow our brows, something that will make us see God as a puzzle, and make us think that true faith is beyond our ability to really do anything or make a real difference. Then we can just sit and enjoy our potluck suppers together, but we won't feel any need to do anything else as a church."

So it should come as no surprise to us that Jesus has a lot to say about money and what we do with it. And it should also come as no surprise that Jesus encountered resistance to his words about money. Just a few verses before our Gospel lesson from Luke, we read these words: "The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him." This is what leads into the parable that Jesus tells about the Rich Man and Lazarus. Lovers of money heard what Jesus had said about not being able to serve God and serve wealth, and they were ready to write him off. "Yeah, right. Whatever."

So Jesus tells them this rather disturbing parable. It is about a man who has the finest things, things that most people can only dream about. Clothes that cost thousands of

dollars per outfit. A home that is hidden behind a gate. Food prepared by master chefs, procured from far away lands, delicacies that most people have never even heard of, let alone tasted.

And it is about another man, one that causes us discomfort to hear about, for he has open sores and stray dogs for companions. He rummages through the dumpster from the rich man's house. He has no house of his own; the street is his home. But he does have a name. It is unusual for Jesus to use names for the characters in his parables. He does not give us a name for the rich man, and we would not expect to hear one. But hearing that the poor man has a name is an important detail. Lazarus is not a mere prop. He is a person, loveable and knowable.

In this parable, Lazarus passes away. No doubt there was not much of a burial. But that is not important. We are told he is carried away by angels. He is important to heaven. Soon afterwards, the rich man dies. He was buried. No doubt he had a fine, rock cut tomb in a ritzy part of a cemetery. No doubt people came from all over to give him a funeral fit for a king.

But no angels carried him away. He ends up in a place of torment, with none of his familiar niceties to comfort him or ease his pain. That is, until he spies something familiar. It's Lazarus! What do you know, here comes that poor excuse for humanity. Father Abraham is with him, and surely Father Abraham is bringing him along to wait upon the rich man! I mean, what other use could there be for Lazarus? "Boy, fetch me some water. Boy, it ain't cold enough! Boy, fan me off, it's hot as Hades in here! Boy, get away from me. Boy, come here. Boy, take a message to my brothers."

But things have changed. The rules on earth are not the rules in God's realm. Lazarus is not a commodity to be used, and Lazarus is not a liability. Lazarus is a Child of Abraham. Lazarus carries the image of God. Lazarus is part of the creation that the Creator has declared "Good."

"Well, now, how was I supposed to know that?" the rich man implies. "I can't be held responsible for the things I don't know! How was I to know people were tortured in Darfur? I didn't live there! How could I know that AIDS is raging through Africa and leaving a bunch of kids to fend for themselves? My kids didn't go to school with any of those African kids. How did I know some poor little kid up my street died with an abscessed tooth? Nobody told me he couldn't afford a dentist! You can't pin things on me that I don't know!"

"My son," Abraham implies, "There's a really deep chasm between us. We can't get to you, and you can't get to us. How do you think this chasm got here? Do you think it is 'just the fates' that put it here? Do you think that God just wants to be difficult and catch you on technicalities? God didn't put the chasm here. No, you dug this chasm long before you died. You put this chasm here. You decided what you didn't want to know about Lazarus, and you shut out a lot of things that the Holy Spirit was trying to show you in your lifetime. That chasm started at the barred gateway to your house."

“Oh, no,” wails Lazarus. “My brothers. My brothers! They need to know about this! They need to get some word about the chasm! If they helped build the chasm, then they can help fill it in, or build a bridge across it!”

“They already have everything they need to know. If they choose not to hear these things, if they choose to distract themselves with other concerns, if they choose to focus on themselves all the more to shut others out, then no one can take the earplugs out of their ears but them. They have the Scriptures. Remember chapter 15 of Deuteronomy? Here, I’ll read some of it to you: “If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, ‘The seventh year, the year of remission, is near,’ and therefore view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing; your neighbor might cry to the LORD against you, and you would incur guilt. Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.’”

“Oh come on, Father Abraham,” says the rich man. “How am I supposed to know about one little obscure passage buried in the Scriptures?” (By the way, this Scripture is on pages 171 and 172 of your Pew Bibles.)

“Obscure? Child, it is part of a larger passage. Besides, you knew about Leviticus 25, the whole thing about the importance of debt relief for the destitute with the sabbatical and jubilee years. And don’t just give me that business about helping only your own kind. You heard the concern not just for the widows and the orphans in the Scriptures, but also God’s concern for “the alien in your midst.” God wasn’t talking about ET, you know. You heard that you were to care about everybody, regardless of their pedigree. The aliens, that is, the foreigners, the different ones, the ones that you don’t easily understand. You heard Isaiah proclaim, ‘if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness.’ You heard Ezekiel describe God as the good shepherd who says, ‘I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak.’ You heard Amos warn of doom when he railed, ‘Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land.’ You heard Micah urge righteousness as he said, ‘they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid.’ And just to illustrate that type of hope, you read about Jeremiah running out into a war zone, and buying his cousin’s property to point out that God doesn’t want battle and destruction to be the last word for humanity, but a peaceable land where everybody has their own place and their own home and their own livelihood. You’ve heard it all! And there’s more! Shall I continue?”

“No, no, Father Abraham. It is too much. The words were there the whole time, and I chose to never read them. But sometimes those ancient words are too hard to understand. Maybe my five brothers need a really, really good teacher...”

“Are you kidding, rich boy? Look what people have done and still do to prophets, to people that tell them things they don’t want to hear.”

“Okay, okay. But maybe, if someone could come back from the dead, then they could listen! How could they ignore someone who came back from the grave to help them?”

“Dear child, if they choose to dig a chasm so deep that they can hide from the repeated and starkly obvious, they will choose to ignore even someone back from the grave.”

So friends, the Bible also encourages wise stewardship and nurture and investment of the gifts we are blessed to hold. Why do we see giving a portion of our gifts to people crying in need on the other side of the world as a liability? Why do we not understand it to be an investment in heaven? Even more so, it is an investment in our own growth in spiritual graciousness. Why do we not see it to be part of building a bridge across a deep and horrible chasm? Our CROP Walk today is an example of one way that we can reach across those chasms of our own creation, and grow in our understanding of who God calls us to become.

Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that, as we read this parable of Lazarus and the rich man, we place ourselves in the persona of the five brothers. We still have a chance. We have the Scriptures. And, we do have one who has risen from the dead to guide us. The big question is, what will we choose to hear? What will we do about it? Amen.