

Sermon
19 Pentecost—Proper 21-C
September 29, 2013
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Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15
Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16
1 Timothy 6:6-19
Luke 16:19-31

In 1st century Palestine and in 21st century America a foundational assumption is that being rich is better than being poor.

This appears so obvious to us that it needs no justification. It is a self-evident truth in the same way being healthy is known to be better than being sick.

And don't think anything I say today will challenge this assumption. I believe deep poverty is a great evil and should be eliminated whenever and wherever it exists. I believe having plenty of food to eat, clothes to wear, and meaningful work in a life free from fear and violence is a great good.

In the Hebrew Scriptures it is assumed and often stated that Abraham's riches were a direct blessing from God and that God blesses Abraham so he may be a blessing to the world.

So far so good.

But Scriptures, Hebrew and Christian, also agree that being rich can be a snare that leads not to blessing but to curse.

As 1st Timothy says:

“...for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it;..But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and **pierced themselves** with many pains.

Wealth, for all its benefits, can lead us away from our connection to God and neighbor, which is a pretty good definition of hell.

Jesus points to this in the parable today of the rich man who ignores the suffering of poor Lazarus who lies at his gate.

The rich man dresses well; Lazarus dresses with sores.

The rich man eats well; Lazarus goes hungry.

The dogs in the rich man's house eat crumbs off the floor; the dogs in the street lick Lazarus' sores.

They are neighbors who might as well be on opposite sides of the planet.

There is a great chasm between these two men.

It reminds me of the Bob Dylan poem:

“Yes, an' how many times must a man turn his head
An' pretend that he just doesn't see?”

“Yes, an' how many ears must one man have
Before he can hear people cry?”

It is self-evident that Lazarus is suffering. The rich man is also suffering, but we can't see it because our foundational assumption tells us that if you eat well and dress well it means you are living well.

But look more closely and see the rich man is so hardened against the suffering of the poor man that his ability to feel anything has been lost.

The rich man has lost touch with his heart. He may eat well and dress well, but he is dying on the inside.

He has lost the human ability to care what happens to strangers—which is to say he has lost his ability to be fully human.

He's got a big house, great food, and fancy clothes, but he has lost his connection with the source of love which flows abundantly through the universe.

He has lost the awareness that he will find his life only to the extent that he can respond to the suffering of Lazarus and know it as his own.

There is a great chasm between these two men in this life that gets continued over into the next life. Only in the next life as he suffers the torments of

hell does the rich man finally see the chasm and ask for someone to help him, to do for him what he never did for Lazarus.

He is told crossing this chasm is impossible, so the rich man asks for someone to go to his brothers who are still alive to tell them to wake up before they miss their life and end up in the same condition as he is in.

So, yes, it can be better to be rich than poor, but it can also be worse, if our riches numb us to the suffering of others—whether they live at our gate or on the other side of the planet.

Of course some crazy people just found it too hard to stay connected to life with all their wealth, so they gave it up and abandoned themselves to God and their neighbor in order to find their lives.

Saint Francis comes to mind. He walks away from his wealthy merchant father and a life of comfort and fun in Italy, in favor of a life in the company of beggars who embrace lepers as their brothers and sisters in Christ.

I think of Dorothy Day who works to establish “the Catholic Worker movement, a nonviolent, pacifist movement that continues today to combine direct aid for the poor and homeless with nonviolent direct action on their behalf.” She would spend most of her adult life living and working with the poor in the slums of New York City. See Wikipedia

But Francis of Assisi and Dorothy of New York are crazy people who are so converted to the presence of God that the things of this world are meaningless to them. Instead they find meaning in what the rich man never even notices—poor Lazarus, and the millions just like, him lying at the gates of the world.

Jesus, of course, is likewise crazy, saying such bizarre things like “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to experience the Kingdom of God.”

He too left his home to wander through Israel opening his soul to the lost, the least, and the last.

These kind of crazy people feel the power of God when they connect with the poor and they say that is the greatest feeling you can ever have.

We may feel it on occasion but then we talk ourselves out of following that feeling into a deeper union with the poor and with the God of the poor.

But these crazy people keep preaching to us through their lives because they want us to know the power and freedom of this radical connection to God and neighbor.

They urge us, to quote 1st Timothy, to **“take hold of the life that really is life.”**

Please notice these saints are not calling us to a life of squeaky clean morality—but to a messy life connecting with those we'd rather hold our nose and step over.

Dorothy and Francis call us some of us to work directly with this poor man or this sick woman, while they call others to work to change any system that creates enormous wealth for the few and great poverty for the billions.

It's easy to feel guilty about our abundance, but guilt is just the wounded ego feeling sorry for itself. What would serve us better is penitence which actually leads to a curiosity about how God wants to use us as his agents for healing the suffering.

We can't do everything, but we can do something.

Jesus is the mediator who bridges the chasm between heaven and earth. At our baptism he liberates God's Spirit in us, so that we as All Saints Church might have the will and the courage to do what the rich man did not do: to sit down with Lazarus and get to know him as a brother in Christ. That would be enough for even the rich man wanted the best for his brothers.

Jesus, the mediator, bridges the chasm between heaven and earth so that we too can “take hold of the life that really is life.”

