

Proper 21C: Luke 16:19-31
Church of the Good Shepherd
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The Opposite of Poverty

If you ever study the parables, one of the things you quickly appreciate is how timeless they are, how no matter whether you are living in the 1st century or the 9th or the 21st, they still resonate. The characters and the situations depicted in the stories are ones we can all relate to. It's natural, then, that in telling the stories today, we might imagine names for the characters, to make them even more relatable. So, in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, say, maybe we'll call the older brother "Seymour," so that at the end of the parable the father is able to say something like, "Come on now, Seymour, put on a party hat, put a smile on your face, and enjoy the party for your lost-but-found little brother!"

There is one parable, though, where we can't do that, where we can't assign a name. Because the character already has one. It's Lazarus, and the parable is the one we just read. It's interesting, don't you think, that it's Lazarus, a *poor* man, a *beggar*, who gets special attention, the only one who gets a name?

Of course, if you've read the rest of Luke's Gospel, you wouldn't be at all surprised. Throughout his gospel, Luke tries to impress upon us the over-riding concern Jesus has for the poor and those on the edges of society. From the song of Mary, in the first chapter, which celebrates God's filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty, to Jesus' first sermon, where he declares that he has been anointed by the Spirit of the Lord "to bring good news to the poor," to the Sermon on the Plain, where Jesus pronounces "Blessed are the poor and woe to those who are rich"—throughout all these, Luke puts concern for the poor front and center in Jesus' teaching.

And here, today's parable, is another case in point. By simply giving the poor man a name, Jesus is subtly challenging the usual view of the poor. The poor are not faceless people, he seems to be saying. The poor are real people with names, identities, and a history. They are not statistics; they are human beings.

I say Jesus does this "subtly" but really there's nothing "subtle" about the set-up in this parable. The first man is flat-out said to be rich. He lived in the lap of luxury. He ate steak and lobster every day, wore designer suits, Tommy Hilfiger pajamas, and silk boxers. He and his wife both drove Teslas, and lived in a large house with a pool on River Road, surrounded by high walls and heavy wrought iron gates like you see in Beverly Hills. This isn't merely someone who is comfortably well-off. This man is rich, super-rich.

And at the other end of his driveway, there was a homeless guy named Lazarus. Lazarus' name, incidentally, means "God is his help," but you wouldn't know it by looking at him. He's nothing but skin and bones, wearing dirty, tattered clothes. Skin covered in open sores. Smells to high heaven. He sits at the end of the rich man's driveway hoping that one day the man in the big

house will take pity on him and bring him some table scraps, leftovers he'll never eat anyway and throw away a couple days later. The amount the rich man spends on one month's country club dues could buy Lazarus plenty of medicine for his wounds. With just the money he pays for streaming services, the rich man could easily provide fresh, hot meals every day for Lazarus. At the very least, he could wheel his garbage to the curb for pickup a little early and let Lazarus rummage through it. But he doesn't. Instead he doesn't even acknowledge Lazarus' presence.

There are no shades of nuance in this story. What we have here are abject poverty and obscene luxury. But then the men die, and their roles are reversed. Lazarus, who had been dumped at the gate, is carried away by angels to be with Abraham, while the rich man, who enjoyed the best in life, is stuck in hell, consumed with thirst.

All is well and good, right? The selfish, greedy guy gets what's coming to him in the end. Only, the story doesn't end tidily with justice for the good and punishment for the bad. Something more subversive is at work.

Look at the parable again. Notice what the rich man says to Abraham. The rich man, surprisingly, seems to recognize Lazarus and even knows his name. Turns out he hadn't been oblivious to the man who sat at his gates after all. So, it's not simply that he didn't know about Lazarus' plight. His failure looks a whole lot more deliberate and intentional when we realize he knew this man, even to the point of knowing his name. I guess he figured the poor man was beneath him, that his only use was as a servant, and if he couldn't do that, then he simply wasn't worth his attention.

Sound a little harsh? Maybe. But notice what he says to Abraham: "Father Abraham, have mercy on me. Send little Lazarus to dip his finger in water and cool my tongue. It's hot as Hades down here." It's not an idle line. It betrays what we might call 'habits of control.' The rich man still believes that he can command and expect a response: "Tell that poor man to bring me some water." Still demeaning, still self-serving. Clarence Jordan, in *Cotton Patch Gospel*, got the beggar's reply right: "Lazarus ain't gonna run no mo yo errands, rich man." As Abraham explains, "During your lifetime you lived in the lap of luxury and comfort while Lazarus lived in squalor and misery. Now he is going to be comforted here with me and you are going to agonize there. There's no undoing it now."

It's easy, in light of the depiction of the rich man and his eternal judgment, to make this parable out to be about the evils of wealth. And many a preacher has done just that. But it doesn't seem to me that the issue is that the man is rich. Jesus' point isn't that the rich are all going to hell. This parable is not a judgment on wealth, but a warning, a warning about the dangers wealth brings. It's not about having money, but about what we do with it, or rather what it can do to us.

The chief danger of wealth, as Jesus' parable illustrates, is its propensity to create a barrier that separates us from others, that divides us, that puts a great rift between the rich and the poor. This divide is clear today as it was then—the sociologist Charles Murray wrote a whole book on the growing chasm between the rich and the poor, how they are divided by education, marriage patterns, religion, and increasingly geography. The vast majority of high-income people live in

demographic “bubbles,” elite neighborhoods in Northeast and West Coast. So, there’s some truth to the complaint about the “rich men north of Richmond.”

Believe me, I get it. Who wouldn’t want to live in a clean, safe, attractive neighborhood? Before I moved here to Virginia, my family and I lived outside Detroit. We quickly learned there was a clear distinction between the city and the suburbs. You didn’t want to live in Detroit unless you had to, on account of the poverty, the crime, the general blight—burned-out, boarded-up homes, hollowed-out factories, trash strewn everywhere. Who can blame the residents of the surrounding counties for wanting a better life than that for themselves and their family? And yet we couldn’t ignore the fact that in making those choices, we distanced ourselves, insulated ourselves from ever having to interact with or even see the poor and needy. This was not because poverty had been eradicated; it was just now out of sight, far away. The same is true here in Richmond. A full quarter of Richmond residents live in poverty.

Of course, solving poverty isn’t just a matter of money, as if we could bridge the chasm between the rich and the poor *simply* by those who have giving their money to those who don’t. Would it have helped if the rich man had tossed a coin out his window to the poor man now and then? What if he had made a little “to-go plate” for the pitiful beggar? Would God have smiled on him? Not likely.

Nor is poverty today solved by the usual means of addressing poverty—through government redistribution. Government redistribution is crude, marginally effective and necessarily coercive—the government compels people to pay taxes. This causes resentment and grievance between haves and have nots. I’m not saying we shouldn’t work for laws and policies that engender greater fairness. We should. But we should be aware of the limitations of going that route. I mean, the income gap between the rich and poor has widened at the same time that government services and government programs have ballooned. In the 45 years since the “War on Poverty,” welfare spending per person in poverty has increased sevenfold, yet the poverty rate has held stable, somewhere between 12 and 15%. Something more is needed than simply government redistribution of wealth.

The reason this is so is revealed in a quote by the Lutheran theologian Jürgen Moltmann. He said: “The opposite of poverty is not property. Rather, the opposite of both is community.” The opposite of poverty isn’t property, the opposite of both is community.

What Moltman meant by this may not be immediately obvious, so let me tell you a story that illustrates what he was getting at. In 1942, Clarence Jordan, who had studied agriculture and then theology, attempted a shocking experiment in living the gospel by founding Koinonia Farm outside Americus, Georgia. Blacks and whites lived together, embodying the kind of community described in Acts, where fellowship (which is what *koinonia* means in Greek) involved communal sharing of all goods. Not everyone approved of Jordan’s little social experiment—folks like the Klu Klux Klan repeatedly terrorized the farm and its residents. But Jordan’s vision endured and ended up inspiring many others.

Among the many impacted by Jordan was a fellow named Millard Fuller. Fuller wound up at Koinonia by accident, trying to save his marriage. In November of 1965, Millard’s wife Linda

told him she was leaving him. So absorbed was he in his business, making the unheard-of sum of one million dollars a year, that he had not noticed she was slipping away. It was a wake-up call to Millard. He piled his wife and their children into their Lincoln Continental and set off for Florida. On the way they met up with some friends in Georgia who had joined the Koinonia community. Millard agreed to have lunch with Jordan, whereupon he confessed he felt this tremendous heaviness in his chest. Jordan responded that "a million dollars can weigh awfully burdensome on a man." Jordan then diagnosed Fuller as a "money-ac," as someone who was addicted to money, just as one can be addicted to drugs or alcohol.

Jordan was fond of saying, "What the poor need is not charity but capital, not caseworkers but coworkers. And what the rich need is a wise, honorable, and just way of divesting themselves of their overabundance." After his lunch with Jordan, Fuller divested himself of his wealth honorably and founded Habitat for Humanity. Habitat for Humanity is a "Christian housing ministry," committed to building "simple, decent, and affordable" homes for low-income families. Since 1976 Habitat has engaged thousands of volunteers in building more than 800,000 homes for the working poor throughout America and in such far-flung locations as South Africa, Hungary, Ireland, and Honduras. Through Habitat, Millard and countless others have demonstrated how the opposite of poverty and the opposite of wealth is community.

The parable of Lazarus and the rich man is a difficult story to swallow, I know. You don't have to live in a 5,000 square foot mansion in Manhattan to feel a sting after hearing this story. Jesus' parable presents a challenge to all of us, a challenge regarding what we do with our wealth. But we should remember: this story is *for* us, not *against* us. Jesus tells this story not to condemn us but because he cannot stand it when we love the things we get for ourselves more than we love the things God wants to give us. When we are satisfied with linen suits and sumptuous feasts when God wants to give us the kingdom. When we are content to live in the world with beggars when God wants to give us brothers and sisters. God wants more than for us than to make us wealthy. He wants to make us family, to bring us into a new community, composed of those who once were rich and those who once were poor, the have and have-nots, living together in the bizarre new world of God's Kingdom and possessing a joy no amount of money could ever buy. Thanks be to God!