

Date: 26 September 2004

SUNDAY: Ordinary 26

**SERMON: Rich Man, Poor Man,
Beggarmen, . . .**

Text(s): 1 Timothy 6:6-10, 17-19; Luke 16:19-31

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Probably most of us have heard that old saying that if you want to get a mule's attention, you first have to hit him between the eyes with a 2 X 4. Well, the framers of our lectionary have served us up a 2 X 4 today. Whenever I read these lessons with their sobering reminders of the danger of riches and the false security that wealth offers, I always feel like I've just been whacked. Not only do I find these lessons particularly uncomfortable to hear, but even more uncomfortable to preach, because I feel like a hypocrite, knowing how far I am from realizing in my own life the claim that I sense these texts are making on me. So perhaps we need to be reminded of Martin Luther's insight that we are all, at one and the same time, righteous people and sinners— *simul iustus et peccator*, and then perhaps together we can listen to these texts with hope in God's mercy.

The author of Luke's gospel has a special interest in the topic of the just use of wealth, because he touches on this theme repeatedly. Of all the stories attributed to Jesus in our gospels, it's only in this one that one of the characters is named. And what's even more interesting, is that the character who is named is not the rich man, but the poor beggar Lazarus. All we're told about the rich man is that he dressed in purple and fine linen and feasted sumptuously every day. The poor man and his plight are described at much greater length. Lazarus, the name of the beggar, means "the one whom God helps." The significance can hardly escape us, for in the story, there's certainly no one else who helps this man.

Yet surprisingly, perhaps, nowhere in this story, is the rich man condemned for being rich. Nowhere is it suggested that he came by his wealth dishonestly or by violence or exploitation. He appears to exemplify the notion common in his time that wealth was a sign of God's favor and poverty a sign of God's displeasure. It's a notion that still is common in our time, isn't it? One of the reasons that welfare reform is always a popular political agenda is the often-expressed notion that people on

welfare are lazy, low-lives who are just milking the system for what they can get without having to work for it. While that's undoubtedly true of some of those who depend on welfare, it's hardly true of the majority; it's just selfishness or ignorance that makes us lump all the poor into one group and blame them for their own poverty. This rich man subscribes to the trickle-down theory of life; he's earned, or inherited, the feast, and he sees no problem with the fact that he should get the cake while the beggar should be content with the crumbs that trickle down from his table.

Nor is Lazarus made out to be a hero because he's poor. As anyone who's ever been poor knows very well, there's nothing heroic about poverty unless it's undertaken voluntarily as a form of witness or identification with other poor people. There's no virtue in poverty itself. In fact, the poor are often anything but virtuous, and a good case could be made that poverty itself contributes to, or is the result of, a lack of virtue. We know that just from looking around us. Who is more likely to become a drug dealer, for example—the comfortable middle class or wealthy executive or the poor teenager from the public housing projects? The poor are every bit as obsessed with wealth as the rich, perhaps more so, because they feel the need of the status that material things convey in our consumer society, which is why we can all think of examples of unemployed people who live in public housing projects but who have large-screen color TV's or drive expensive cars.

So the rich man in this story is not damned for being rich, and Lazarus is not rewarded because he's poor. The story is much more interesting and troubling than that.

When the rich man dies and awakens to find himself in torment, it becomes clear that his damnation is not for being wealthy, but for his terrible innocence in allowing that wealth to insulate him from the plight of the poor beggarman Lazarus sitting on his doorstep. His sin was not that he was rich, but that he was blind and indifferent. His wealth insulated him from reality and created a climate in which compassion could not grow. C. S. Lewis once said that the danger of having wealth is that we can buy just enough happiness with it to create the illusion that we have no need for God. This rich man failed to see that his table was not

really his table, but he and Lazarus were both guests at God's table. By having his cake and eating it, and not sharing it with Lazarus, he became, in effect, a thief, and a damned thief at that. His bewilderment at finding himself in hell and Lazarus in Abraham's bosom is almost touching, it's so pathetic. In a scene of profound irony, he begs for Lazarus to come and relieve his suffering. His terrible innocence persists even in his torment and that is his damnation.

This story reminds us that while we may be blind or indifferent to the real source of our life, to the reality of our total dependence upon God, and consequently, our blindness to our solidarity with the poor around us, God is not. God, in fact, if the scriptures are to be taken seriously, appears to be biased in favor of the poor and the hungry and the excluded and the oppressed. Why? Not, as I've already said, because the poor are particularly virtuous or morally superior to the rich. Rather, the poor have fewer illusions about the real source of life than do those who have enough wealth to insulate them from the rougher bumps in life's road. The comforting insulation of stock portfolios and real estate holdings and secure pension funds and good health insurance is denied them; life is much more precarious, always much more on the edge for the poor. That's why we often refer to them as marginalized. And so they are not as easily deceived into thinking that they are self-made and self-sufficient. They more readily recognize that they have no one to help them but God.

The author of our epistle lesson understood this very well. *"For we brought nothing into this world,"* he says, *"and it is certain that we can carry nothing out. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. 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 through with many pains."*

One of the members of my church in Paris told me that he was being forced—*forced!*—to turn down a job that really interested him and take one that he didn't want because if he took the one that really interested him, he would have to take a

slightly lower salary, and while this wouldn't be a financial hardship personally, he was afraid it would stigmatize him in the eyes of his peers on the corporate ladder, and he would be seen as not serious about his career path. So he was going to have to take the job he didn't want just to keep moving upward in his career track.

Does that sound familiar to you? Does it suggest, perhaps, that our whole society might be on the wrong career path? When we get to the point that we can think of ourselves as being forced to do something we don't want to do because doing something we really want to do for a lower salary stigmatizes us, then it sounds like we've fallen prey to what the biblical writer calls "senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin" and cause them to "pierce themselves through with many pains."

Now I'm not naive enough to suggest that the solution is for all of us to divest ourselves of everything we own and join the ranks of the happy poor. For one thing, I don't know many people who are happy about being poor, and there's certainly no suggestion in our gospel lesson that Lazarus was a particularly happy camper. Who could be happy when dogs are licking the sores caused by malnutrition? Nor does our epistle writer advocate universal poverty as the solution to the sorrows of obsession with money. He does not counsel poverty; rather he exhorts us to learn to be content with enough.

That word "enough" is a word that hardly has any place in our cultural vocabulary these days. It's almost anti-American to be content with enough. Our favored words are "more," "bigger," and "faster." It's not even possible in Starbucks to order a "small" coffee, although I usually do, just to make a point. But the person waiting on me invariably corrects me, and says, "Do you mean a Tall, sir?" "Tall" is the smallest size coffee you can buy in Starbucks. We don't relate well to the concept of "enough." Enough sounds so boring. Yet enough is a word that is pregnant with freedom. In that little word the walls of the self-made prison of possessions begin to crumble. In that little word, there is hope not only, for all the Lazaruses of the world but for all the rich as well. And you and I know very well, that when we measure ourselves

against the vast majority of the world's people, even the least wealthy among us is rich.

But how do we get from "more" to "enough?" And I want us to be clear that for nearly every one of us here this morning, that is the crucial question. Most of us here will not be able to identify with Lazarus; it is the damnation of the rich man that we have to figure out how to avoid. How can we escape the terrible innocence of the rich that makes poor Lazarus on our doorstep invisible?

Again, our epistle lesson points the way. *"As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty nor to set their hopes on uncertain riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment."*

The first step out of the obsessive and insulating power of wealth is to recognize that we are dependent upon God for everything, even the very breath in our lungs. And I love what he says about this God on whom we are utterly dependent. This is not a killjoy God who wants to deprive us of anything that brings pleasure. This is a God who "richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment." God wants us to have abundant life, not merely a life that is lived at the minimum level of survival. To trust in God is not a sacrificial act that makes us give up everything good; quite the reverse, trusting in God rather than in the Dow Jones or the Nasdaq brings us the very security and enjoyment that our riches take from us. No one ever lost a night's sleep from trusting in God. Could we say the same about those days when the market drops 500 points?

What does it mean to trust God rather than riches? Well, he spells it out for us. *"Do good, be rich in good works, be generous and ready to share, thus storing up the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life."*

That phrase, "the life that is really life," reminds me of the supposedly true story (emphasis on the supposedly) of the Texan who became an overnight millionaire when oil was discovered beneath his ranch. In the manner of many newly rich people, he used to flaunt his new wealth by driving around Houston in a special edition Cadillac convertible painted with real gold paint with seats made from the hides of his own steers. On the front

bumper, he mounted a big set of Texas longhorns and the horns were also gilded. He drove it wearing a big Stetson ten-gallon hat, with an expensive Havana cigar in his mouth.

He gave instructions in his will that when his time came to depart this life for those big oil fields in the sky, he was to be buried sitting behind the wheel of his gold Cadillac with his Stetson on his head and a big Havana in his mouth. When he died, crowds of people gathered for the spectacle to see him buried in this gold Cadillac. And as the crane lowered the car into the gigantic hole in the ground, with its dead owner sitting behind the wheel, a cigar jutting from the embalmed smile on his face, someone in the crowd was heard to exclaim in an awed voice, "Man, that's living!"

It is what passes for real life for many, isn't it? But our epistle writer says that real life is to be found, not in trusting ourselves to the uncertainties of riches, but in doing good with our wealth and sharing generously. Taking hold of the life that is really life is not so much a matter of believing something as it is a matter of doing something. Our behavior is the evidence of where we have placed our ultimate trust— in God or in our wealth. I long ago discovered that in my own personal dealing with money, the only way I could even hope to control its power over me was to make some very deliberate decisions about the percentage of it I was going to give away. I've personally found it helpful to follow the biblical principle of tithing— of giving away ten percent of my income, not simply because it's a biblical principle, but because it works. When any of us makes a decision right up front that regardless of what we earn and regardless of what we perceive as our needs, we're going to give away a certain percentage, we are making a statement about where the wellsprings of our life are. We are taking hold of the life that is really life. And we begin to really see the Lazaruses on our doorstep, and begin to recognize them and our connectedness to them.

When I was pastoring in New Brunswick, NJ, our church took responsibility for cooking and serving the evening meal at the community soup kitchen one Friday per month. Waiting tables in a soup kitchen, I discovered, is a great help in being able to recognize Lazarus. For me, Lazarus was a man named Adam. Adam had a serious drinking

problem, and he was homeless. When I first met him, he was in a really sorry state. He had an ulcerated foot that was so swollen he couldn't wear shoes, but only some ragged old socks and a loose-fitting bedroom slipper. He was obviously malnourished, and scrounged his bare existence on the streets. He was always trying to con me out of money to buy some blackberry brandy which he swore he needed to help heal his foot. After the soup kitchen opened, Adam became a regular customer, and not one of the more savory customers at that. Let's just say that his personal hygiene left something to be desired. But after months of serving Adam dinner at his table, and watching him eat as if he would never get another meal, Adam began to change before my eyes. His drinking problem didn't disappear, but he began to look healthier. His color got better. And his foot began to heal as his diet improved. And the better he felt and looked physically, the better his mind worked, and instead of talking nonsense most of the time and shuffling around like a zombie, Adam began to look and act like a human being. He could actually carry on a conversation, and I discovered that he'd had a family and a respectable job before he became depressed and started drinking his way to ruin. I don't know if those Friday nights in the soup kitchen helped Adam get his life back again; I do know they helped me get back mine.

It's been that personal contact with the Adams and the other Lazaruses I've met down through the years that, perhaps more than anything else, has motivated me to continue to struggle— and it is a constant struggle— to resist the temptation to allow money to imprison me within a gilded cage of my own making.

So these texts leave us faced with a choice: will we use our wealth generously to do good? Will we see Lazarus and learn his name and use our wealth to tend his needs? Or will we persist in our terrible innocence, believing that the feast is ours by right and think ourselves charitable because we let fall a few crumbs from our overloaded table? The choice we make will reveal whether or not we have learned how to recognize and take hold of the life that is really life.