

Christ Confronts our Selfishness: A Sermon on the Dangers of Wealth and the Promise of Hospitality

Good morning. The song that we just sang together¹ is a very close reproduction in music of Luke 6:20-36, a text that appears a whole 10 chapters before the text for today that recounts the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. The text of Luke 6 is his version of what we often call the Beatitudes, which are known more commonly from Matthew's Gospel (cf. Matt. 5). I don't know if any of you felt *disturbed* or *moved* while singing the song, but I think if we didn't feel one of those or other similar emotions, we probably weren't thinking through the words of the song – words that, no matter what way you read them, cut across the grain of our dominant society's convictions about what counts for blessedness. How appropriate, then, to sing a song like this before looking at a parable of Jesus, given that Jesus' parables often cut against the grain of our dominant society's convictions on any number of topics.

As Greg mentioned in his sermon last week, Jewish scholar of the New Testament, Amy Jill Levine, has pointed out how many of Jesus' parables often provide comfort for those afflicted but affliction for those feeling comfortable.² The text from Luke 6 that inspired our hymn of preparation certainly does that – offers comfort to the poor, hungry, weeping, hated ones in the form of the words “blessed are you,” and conversely, provides woes to those who are rich, full, laughing, and socially dominant in the form of the words “woe to you.” The comfort for the afflicted comes by way of Jesus' assurance that divine justice is ultimately oriented towards their eternal blessedness, and on the other hand, the woe for the comforted comes by way of Jesus

¹ The song that our congregation sang is found in *Voices Together* #290 and is titled “Blessed are You.”

² Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories By Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, 3. After preaching the above text, I noted that in actual context, Levine leans towards parables “afflicting” more than comforting. She says: “Religion has been defined as designed to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. We do well to think of the parables of Jesus as doing the afflicting.”

stating the ultimate emptiness awaits those who hoard their wealth to comfort themselves at the expense of others in this life.

I begin my meditation with this passage from Luke 6 because in many ways I think it can be seen as a primer or preview early in Jesus' teaching of what he later would expand upon when telling the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16. There are several parallels between the passages, not least being the oppositional characters—the poor and the rich—and the opposing experiences of blessedness – the rich man experiencing *so-called* blessedness in life while poor Lazarus suffers - and poor Lazarus experiencing blessedness in the afterlife while the rich man suffers. What are we to make of the dramatic reversal of fate portrayed in this parable of Jesus and how, sticking with our Lenten theme, might Jesus be using this parable to help us face up to our tendency to selfishness, our tendency to avoid doing the right thing and caring for others because it will mean giving up something we would rather keep for ourselves?

To explore these questions, let's dig into the parable a bit more. Actually, before we go straight to the parable, a quick word about the broader context of Luke 16 might be helpful. Jesus' parables always appear in the context of his interactions with people throughout his ministry, of course, and the parable of the rich man and Lazarus is no exception. We already know from last week that Jesus was in the midst of telling parables to a diverse crowd of people³ when he told the story of the father and his two sons. Luke portrays Jesus as carrying on, almost

³ I have intentionally noted the diverse crowd of people here to widen the indictment of Jesus' message to all who would seek to serve wealth. Sadly, Luke's description in 16:14 of the Pharisees as "lovers of money" (*philagouroi*) has been weaponized by Christians against Jews throughout history, apart from any nuanced assessment of this insult's ambiguous original target or the ways in which this is an indictment against *all* who love money and not against a particular group. As Levine notes in her important comments on Luke's portrayal of the Pharisees in the *Jewish Annotated New Testament*: "Josephus would beg to differ: he states, 'Pharisees simplify their standard of living, making no concession to luxury.'" (*Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 110). For more on this topic, see also Levine's important chapter "Preaching and Teaching the Pharisees" in *The Pharisees*, eds. Joseph Sievers and Amy-Jill Levine (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021): 403-427.

without taking a breath, and telling yet another parable about a rich man who had a manager that was squandering the rich man's property. We don't have time to get into this parable today, but it is worthwhile noting that earlier in Luke 16, Jesus had already told a parable of a "rich man" before getting to the parable we are looking at today. It is also worth mentioning that the first parable about a rich man ends with what is perhaps one of the more well-known sayings of Jesus on the topic of wealth:

Luke 16:13 No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

I think these words are certainly one major interpretive key, for us, for understanding what is to come in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. After all, what do we find at the outset of our parable for today? We find a "rich man" who relished in and loved—who seemed to serve—one particular master in his life: his wealth and the life it afforded him. He was dressed in purple all the time – which meant he was dressing up in expensive clothes as if for a banquet or a feast regularly – and he indeed did "feast sumptuously every day." The regularity with which this rich man did these things suggests his devotion to or service of his master – his own wealth. *His* life, *his* priorities, *his* time, and *his* energy were oriented towards the use of his wealth for himself.

We don't know exactly how long this rich man had made this opulent lifestyle his habit, but as the parable continues, we learn of a new man in the story, Lazarus who Jesus describes in basically polar opposite terms to the rich man. Instead of the purple and the fine linen, the poor man wears sores on his body, and instead of feasting sumptuously, he longs for crumbs to fall from the rich man's table. If we read this story sequentially and in an open-ended manner without the end in view, we might imagine the first or even second or third day poor Lazarus began to appear at the rich man's gate, and we could imagine that his presence there represented

a major moment of decision for the rich man: what would he do about this poor man at his gate? We might even think of the gate itself as a metaphor here for the decision placed before the rich man. Gates are places of transition, from one place to the next. Will the rich man step through the gate, going outside of himself to help the poor man or will he stay safely indoors, relishing in his own desires and passions? It is helpful, I think, to read parables like this one as inviting us to consider differing moments of decision in our lives today, no matter the estate we find ourselves in.

In any case, the decision before the rich man is crystal clear – help the poor man or ignore him. The parable doesn't actually say if there was any interaction between the two of them, but the remainder of the parable would have us believe that the rich man was at least aware of poor Lazarus' presence at his gate and chose to ignore him. After all, when the rich man and Lazarus are in their respective stations in the afterlife, the rich man knows Lazarus by name. But importantly, Lazarus is not the only person the rich man knows by name, he also knows Abraham, whom he calls "Father Abraham." It may not seem remarkable at first reading, but I think it is actually incredibly important to take note of Abraham's presence in this story.⁴ Abraham, after all, was the one who was remembered for stepping out to serve God, not his own ambitions – and the result was that his people would be a blessing and light among the nations (Gen 12). Using the image of the gate again, we might say he stepped out of the gate of the familiar, and into the unknown space of God's calling where true blessing awaited.

Famously, along his journey Abraham is remembered as showing *hospitality* to the three visitors sent from God in Genesis 18, feeding them from the choice offerings of his grain and his herd. For these reasons, in Jesus' day Abraham was known as a faithful servant of God,

⁴ Levine's reflections on Abraham's presence in this story are on point and very helpful. Cf. Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories By Jesus*, 282-290.

especially because of how he showed hospitality. Returning to our parable, then, does not the presence of Abraham jump out at us? The rich man, seemingly on his own and suffering in Hades, is separated by a large chasm from hospitable Abraham and Lazarus. The contrast, as with the previous contrast between the rich man and Lazarus in life, could not be more stark now in the afterlife. Lazarus is not just “with” Abraham, but is as the KJV puts it, brought by the angels into Abraham’s bosom, a striking image of intimacy and belonging in the family. As A.J. Levine, whose reflections on this parable have taught me a lot, notes that,

Father Abraham holds his child Lazarus and thus provides him the nurture he did not receive at the rich man’s gate. For feasting, Lazarus is reclining on Abraham’s chest, just as the beloved disciples reclined on Jesus’s chest at the Last Supper (John 13.23). The posture suggests a banquet, a motif that might be expected given Jesus’s focus on food and banqueting and the parable’s detailing of food and drink.⁵

Abraham’s hospitality is all of a sudden a central element in this story and it serves as an indictment against the rich man. The rich man, after all, knows Abraham. Indeed, he calls him “Father Abraham.” But, in the afterlife, the rich man is not at Abraham’s table. Knowing Abraham in life and knowing that Abraham was a model for him of the hospitality God called him to, didn’t lead him to put this knowledge into action in caring for the poor man at his gate.

Hospitality and the clear Gospel call to care for the poor are, I think central elements to this story, even if they don’t present themselves on the surface of the parable at first blush. While much of the parable seems to center of the reversal of fates between the rich man and Lazarus, there are layers to the story worth exploring, and one of those layers is the question we began to explore in experiencing the story: “what kept the rich man from doing the right thing in life?” Perhaps we can begin to answer *this* question by considering how even in the afterlife, the rich man continues to obstinately think only of himself. At one point in the dialogue, after begging for

⁵ Levine, *Short Stories By Jesus*, 282-283.

Lazarus to help him cool down, he implores Abraham to “send [Lazarus]” back to earth to warn his brothers about the consequences of failing to care for the poor.⁶ Apparently, this rich man still thinks Lazarus should be at his beck and call, now in this case to ensure that his kindred avoid his own fate. It’s as if the rich man hasn’t learned anything yet. Abraham responds with an indictment that is as significant for the rich man and his family as it should be for us today, too: “They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.” Abraham in effect says, “this isn’t complicated! I’m known for hospitality, Moses and the Prophets call you to hospitality, the law itself commands you to ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land,’ so what’s the issue here?” If the rich man and his family need clarity about doing the right thing, they’ve already got it staring them in the face. Sending Lazarus isn’t going to do the trick. Would they listen to him even then, coming back from the dead, or would they likely continue to ignore him?

Evidently, the problem with failing to do the right thing is not one of misunderstanding or lack of clarity, so what is it? Here I think our theme for today, “Christ confronts our selfishness,” comes into play. Selfishness is, in this parable, put on stark display in the figure of the rich man, and what his selfishness both in life *and* in the afterlife seems to teach us, is that wealth is a powerful and dangerous slave-master, for it is that part of our lives that pulls or draws our passions inward, towards what *we* need and want – and it plays on our fears that if we share our wealth too readily, if we open our hands, there will not be enough for us and our own needs. Reading this parable, we may not see ourselves in the image of the selfish rich man enslaved to his own wealth, but surely if we think of this rich man’s access to wealth as a powerful tool of his security, comfort, and power, we can begin to see ourselves in the story too – perhaps in our

⁶ Levine puts it this way: “The rich man, dead himself, still thinks of Lazarus as an available servant.” *Short Stories By Jesus*, 293.

own way in service to the slave-master of wealth. We might not identify with the man living in opulence and feasting on the finest food every day, but maybe we could identify with someone living nearby, down the street. Maybe we know Lazarus by name too. Will we look at the rich man and say, “he’s got the wealth, why won’t he do something about it?” or “How horrible it is that he has so much wealth and uses it so wastefully,” and then walk by Lazarus all the same? Or walking by will we listen for God’s call to us to do whatever we can with the resources we have to show care for those in need. God’s call to us in Jesus’ parable is clear even if it is difficult for us: don’t walk by but show hospitality, especially to those who you have a concrete connection to – those in your community that you *can* help.

In closing this reflection on the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, I want to leave us to reflect on two provocative images in this story: the gate and the chasm. The gate, as I said earlier, could be understood as representing a moment of decision – will we walk through in obedience to use what God has given us to help those in need and show hospitality? Or, out of fear or selfish ambition, will we avoid the gate – avoid the call of God? Avoiding the call of God continually, according to this parable, creates a rift, a chasm between us and the neighbour whom we are called to love. Regardless of our beliefs about the afterlife, I think the image of the chasm is helpful for picturing for us how failing to answer the Gospel’s call to hospitality creates an increasingly distant gap between us and those whom we are called to love so that eventually, their well-being is no longer seen as necessarily connected to our own, and all we are left with is what we’ve kept for ourselves. Jesus’ parable leaves us with the question: will we choose hospitality before so much of a gap is established between us and our neighbors that it seems no longer possible to bridge that gap?

Lest we despair, thinking that such a gap has already taken hold in our world, we should remember the words of Jesus that appear a short time later in Luke: "What is impossible for mortals is possible for God" (Luke 18:27). Confessing our inclination to selfishness, and especially to the ways that wealth tempts us in this life, may we heed the call of God to walk through the gate, and find ourselves drawn together with our neighbors at God's feast. AMEN