

The Rev. T. Stewart Lucas
St. Margaret's Church
Proper 21 C
September 30, 2007
Luke 16:19-31

As I was leaving the terrific Fall Newcomers Dinner last night, I told people I had to get home to finish my sermon. "Oh, what's it about?" someone asked. "Well," I said, "you know Jesus has been talking about money the past few weeks." "Oh I hate that," my friend quickly replied. "Really?" I said. "What do you hate about it?" "Well I just don't want St. Margaret's to turn into a church that all about our money."

Interesting, I thought. I navigated myself out of that conversation pretty quickly and went to the kitchen to get my dishes and said one more goodbye to a Newcomers Committee member who also knew I was preaching. I said, "Yes, Jesus and money again." She said begrudgingly, "Oh great."

Mention Jesus and money and our anxiety level shoots through the roof. Why is that?

Don't worry. This is not a stewardship sermon in which I beg you to fill out your pledge card to help pay the light bills and my salary and pay for the paper on which your bulletin is printed. I do hope you will consider tithing your income to the church and think about leaving a bequest to St. Margaret's in your will, but I think we need to go continue the dialogue about our anxiety concerning Jesus and money. So yes, it is a stewardship sermon, but let go of your anxiety about filling out a pledge card for a few more weeks.

I'll admit that I'm anxious about money too. Who isn't? The Forbes 400 came out a couple of weeks ago once again listing Bill Gates as the richest man in America with a net worth of some 59 billion dollars. My sermon and your bulletin were written with the help of his computer operating systems. The second on the list is Warren Buffet with a mere 52 billion. Further down the list are six members of the Walton family, owners of Walmart and the Mars family who made the candy bar I enjoyed yesterday. I kept looking down the list for my name, but of course it wasn't there. I looked for your names too, but I didn't see them.

Most of us don't consider ourselves rich anyway. We don't feast sumptuously every day like the rich man in our parable today. Who has the luxury of time? We give some money here and there for the help of the poor, but we hardly make drastic life changes for the sake of those in need. I suppose this is because we're anxious that we won't have enough money for the necessities of life or enough savings in the bank for those emergency situations.

So in walks Jesus to tell us a story about a man who made the Jerusalem 400 and Lazarus. What is it, just a guilt trip that Jesus is trying to throw on us like a good mother? Well, yes and no. We are certainly being called to action by this gospel, and there's nothing wrong with using a little bit of guilt to urge us to move forward. We get anxious immediately because we might have to change. On the other hand Jesus does not say that the rich man is bad or that he is evil. Maybe this parable is given to us today to put our lives, our blessings, and the challenges we encounter with our neighbors into perspective.

That happened for me this week when I heard about a website called the Global Rich List. You should visit it sometime, www.globalrichlist.com. I filled in my salary and clicked on the "show me the money" button. Turns out that I'm in the top 0.99% of the richest

people in the world. There are some 6.7 billion people total in the world. That means there are 6,640,194,142 poorer than me. Instead of one of the top 400 richest people in the world, that makes me the **59,805,858** richest person in the world.

That website changed my anxiety from not having enough to having too much.

There is indeed a great chasm between the rich and the poor in our world, in our country, and even in our own congregation. Economists, newspapers, and our own lives tend to tell us that the chasm does not seem to be fixed, but rather it is growing deeper and deeper by the minute. This parable shakes the ground on which we thought we firmly stood.

But let's return to our rich man. He didn't do anything wrong did he? He wasn't breaking any commandments by leaving poor Lazarus at his door. In fact, he was giving him a place to stay. But what would Amos say? Amos would define the rich man as being at ease in Zion, complacent perhaps. He enjoyed the great benefits of his wealth wearing the latest fashions and eating those gourmet meals while Lazarus was right there in his midst, hungering for his scraps.

In last week's gospel, Jesus told us we couldn't serve two masters, "God and mammon (wealth)." If we cannot get our priorities straight and use what we have wisely remembering these scriptures, we approach the kind of complacency that the prophet Amos guards against.

In order to experience the warmth of the bosom of Abraham, we must come to terms with our wealth. Jesus is not condemning us for having it, but perhaps Jesus is condemning our relationship with our money. Have we too been flaunting our designer clothes and tripping over the Lazarus in our lives?

We are tempted to keep our hands clean of those around us. We find it easier to step over the Lazarus in our lives or look the other way. But we cannot look away from the God who is a God of compassion and love. Psalm 146 tells us that God favors those in need, giving justice to the oppressed and food to the hungry. "The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind; the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down." But the rich man didn't want to get his hands dirty. He didn't take any action to improve Lazarus' life, and he didn't make friends.

The rich man did not create a relationship with Lazarus, and I believe this is the reason that the chasm was created. The rich man didn't share his life or his wealth with anyone. He had not been evil or even mean, but he simply ignored the other in his life. Even in death, the rich man ignored the value of Lazarus and treated him as a slave, wanting him to bring him some cooling water and then to go back and tell his family about the consequences.

God does not ignore us nor does God ever forget us, rich or poor. There is a place for each and every one of us in the bosom of Abraham, but we have to be willing to get our hands dirty. "It's not the wealth that is condemned, it's the complacency. We may not be wealthy, but still we can be indifferent to others. When our own life runs along smoothly, we can lose awareness and sensitivity to those in need, especially to those in our immediate surroundings. Lazarus, after all, was at the man's door. But through television and the internet, the whole world is at our door. While we can't address all the needs we become aware of, we cannot use that as an excuse for inactivity."ⁱ

No, this parable is all about relationships and being willing to wrestle around in the mud with each other and for each other. And you know what happens when you do some down and dirty work with your neighbor? You get to know them better. If you've ever been on a mission trip to Appalachia or Honduras or worked with Habitat for Humanity, you know

what I'm talking about. Working with your friends in grub clothes, without makeup and without perfect hair, you realize that we are all created equal. We are reminded of that deep link that we have with those around us. We read in the Bible that God has called some individuals, but God usually didn't call them for their own good, but for the good of a people. God didn't make covenants with individuals, but with a people.

The rich man and Lazarus were both part of God's chosen people, but the rich man forgot, and we can as well. The rich man broke the covenant and suffered because of it. The rich man created the chasm, not God.

God has chosen each and every one of us to be a part of the covenant people. Our wake-up call this morning is that we have to get our hands dirty to keep up our part of that covenant. As it turns out, we have all made God's rich list, the only list that really matters. Instead of worrying about building up our earthly treasures though, God calls us to open the gates in our lives and spend time providing for others with a hug, or a smile, or a bag of groceries. Maybe we are just called to notice someone, to learn their name and say a prayer for them and realize that even though we may be different, we are really all the same, rich because we are blessed to be one of God's possessions held in the bosom of Abraham.

I'll close with a short church history lesson. August 10th was the feast day of Laurence, Deacon of Rome. He ministered to the poor people of the streets of Rome. He spent money from the diocesan treasury to feed and clothe the poor. When the church was under persecution by the Roman Empire in the year 258, Laurence was ordered by a magistrate to round up the treasures of the church and turn them over to the government. "Laurence, in reply, assembled the sick and poor to whom, as archdeacon, he had distributed the Church's relief funds, and presented them to the prefect, saying, 'These are the treasures of the Church.'"ii For that witness to the faith he was martyred.

We are not being called to turn in our automatic withdrawal forms to the treasurer of St. Margaret's this morning. We are not even required to sell all that we have in order to receive the body and blood of Christ at this altar. We are not being called to give up our lives as Laurence did, because you see, "the word 'martyr' does not mean death; the word 'martyr' means 'witness.' In our case, as Christians, martyrdom is evidenced in the whole of our lives, in the giving of self in fullness that holds back nothing. As we live, and when we leave, our treasure and the church's will not be measured by how much we take away [as the rich man thought], but by how much we have spent, our legacy measured in the lives of others."iii Dear people of God, when you come to the altar rail this morning, think about letting go of you anxiety. Let's get our hands dirty together and build a bridge to span the chasm to that place where we all receive the gift of eternal life and where our souls rock in the bosom of Abraham.

ⁱ Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA
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26TH. SUNDAY -C- SEPTEMBER 26, 2004 <http://opsouth.org/preach/preach%20firstimpart.htm>*Ibid.*

ⁱⁱ *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*, 1997. The Church Pension Fund. p. 320.

ⁱⁱⁱ Portaro, Sam. *Brightest and Best: A Companion to the Lesser Feasts and Fasts*. Cowley:1998. p. 136.