

PENTECOST PROPER 21 C 2010

This is one of my favorite parables. It is wonderfully surreal. Such great contrasts in circumstances, and reversals of position. Lots of interesting detail. Incredibly graphic. Small wonder that the story of Lazarus and the rich man has so often been depicted in literature and the visual arts.

Early in the action Lazarus dies, and is “carried away by angels to be with Abraham.” Where, exactly, Lazarus is taken is far from clear. One ancient view, still very much alive in the Eastern Orthodox church, is that Abraham welcomes the righteous in a special section of Hades where they remain until Judgment Day. Hopefully it is air conditioned and outfitted with comfortable couches, flat screen tv’s, and the like. Another ancient belief is that Abraham presides over an in-between place, a kind of limbo, where the righteous who died before Christ came on the scene remained until his Resurrection. Over time, however, *Western* Christians have gravitated to a third view, namely that Abraham awaits the righteous in heaven from the moment of their death. This latter view fits best with the utter topsy-turvy-ness of this morning’s parable.

So here’s a question. Why did the rich man wind up in Hades where he suffered eternal torment? Is it because he was *rich*? We had better hope not, because if so, and if per capita wealth world-wide is the basis for comparison, we are all going straight to Hell. Even if we limit the wealth comparison to people living in the United States, there are a whole bunch of us who might want to stock up on some of those little hand-held battery-operated fans. However, Scripture makes clear that it is not riches per se that condemn us. Rather, it is our relationship towards money and wealth. It is what money and wealth *mean* to us, what money and wealth *do* to us, and what we do *with* money that can put our souls at risk.

As the author of 1st Timothy puts it, “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.” It is the *desire* for wealth, the *love* of money, and *eagerness* to be rich that get us into spiritual trouble.

More often than not, the chase after riches leaves us permanently dissatisfied, and robs us of the contentment that the Epistle writer celebrates. It displaces our values, and cannibalizes our sense of self worth. It places us at the world's disposal, and untethers us from our spiritual roots.

In my former life as a law professor, I watch generation after generation of law students graduate and head off to mega law firms in New York City. For many of them, this wasn't so much a personal, well-considered choice as it was a decision to follow the path of least resistance. Even if the day-to-day work was not exactly what they had dreamed of doing, at least they would be exceedingly well-compensated for it, would be surrounded by smart people, and would have a ready-made impressive-sounding answer to give to anyone who asked "What do you do for a living?" They could pay off their educational loans, save some money, and then in a few years make a career shift to something that was more personally satisfying. At least that was the theory.

For some students, the decision was exactly the right one. They found the work wonderfully congenial, and a great fit for their talents and temperament. For others, being a Wall Street or midtown lawyer was an uneasy fit, but probably worth it on balance. And then there was a third group who hated the work they were doing, and felt alienated from the values that led them to law school in the first place. Now you might think that the later would flee the wallfirms in droves. But you would be wrong. More often than not, they stuck it out because they felt trapped by circumstances, or lacked the energy to make a move, or were unable to imagine what else they might do.

These are graduates who began their careers with an appropriately complex and layered sense of who they were and what they had to offer the world. Before long, however, they began to measure themselves and their worth by a single metric – the size of the deals they were working on. "I may not be happy, I may not have time for family and friends, I may not be growing professionally, I may be deeply depressed, but hey, I'm working on a stock offering worth \$3 billion, so life can't all bad." Now please understand, I am not suggesting that the work they were doing was inherently unworthy. It's just that for them it was not a good fit. For them it was a certifiably bad fit. But instead of figuring out what would make

their hearts soar and enable them to live into their best selves, or less grandly instead of opting for work that would be less dispiriting, they learned to love money as an all purpose substitute for the things that previously mattered most to them.

We can't say for sure what the money chase meant to the rich man in the parable, nor can we say in what ways it came to define him. Maybe he was arrogant and haughty from birth. However, the fact that he has no name, and is identified solely by his wealth, suggests that his love of money is central to who he is. We *do* know something about what he did and did not do with his fortune. We know that he dressed expensively and feasted sumptuously while Lazarus lay starving on his door step.

Why do you suppose he did he not share his bounty with Lazarus? Perhaps he was heartless, but I want to suggest a couple of other reasons that are not so easily condemned, and that just might implicate good people like you and me. I suspect that one reason the man did not open his wallet to Lazarus is that he regarded his money as hard-earned and his pleasures as well-deserved. He had worked hard. He had been diligent. He had taken risks. He had been clever. It was only right that he should reap the rewards of his effort. It was *his* money. He could spent it however he wished. He might give some of it to charity, but he had a right to decide which ones and how much to give, and he shouldn't have to be made to feel guilty by this man who saw fit to lay at his gate.

I am sympathetic to most of the sentiments that I just put into the rich man's mouth. But the sentiment that I would take exception to is this – "It is *my* money." Every Sunday we affirm just the opposite. "All things come of thee O Lord, and of thine own have we given thee." If we truly believe this, then we cannot in good faith have the same relationship to our bounty as did the man in the parable. Does this mean that we should provide support to every Lazarus who crosses our path? That depends on where we walk, and on the particular ways in which we are each called to further God's mission in the world. But the larger point is that it is both a duty and a delight to give in the name of the One from whom all blessings flow.

In addition to wanting to hang onto what he regarded as his *own* hard-earned fortune, I suspect that the man in the parable did not help Lazarus because he viewed him as little more than the sum of his afflictions. Instead of seeing Lazarus as someone whose life circumstances forced him into an untenable position, the man saw a “beggar.” Instead of seeing Lazarus as someone with a skin disease, the man saw a “leper.” This helps to explain why in the afterlife the rich man had the temerity to ask Abraham to send Lazarus down from heaven to slake his thirst. He had already defined Lazarus as a lesser being, and could not see differently even though Lazarus was in heaven and he was not.

Most of us fall into the same trap from time to time. We confuse circumstances with identity. People who are poor become “the poor.” People who are wealthy become “the rich.” A person who commits a crime becomes “a criminal.” A person who practices law becomes “a lawyer.” I am kind of teasing with that last one, but not really. Converting what a person does for a living into her identity, and then thinking you’ve got her pegged, is a lot like converting a person’s life circumstances into her identity.

Don’t get me wrong, these are all useful verbal short hands. And the English language does not offer many easy ways to speak otherwise. I keep trying to use phrases such as “people who are poor,” and inevitably fall back on “the poor.” But the problem is not just one of grammar. The deeper problem is that we human beings have a tendency to peg people, and to put them in mental boxes, which makes it exceedingly difficult for us to see the fullness of their being.

And so I invite you in the days ahead to think about who you might have shortchanged recently, by seeing them as less than they truly are. Or as less than they truly might become. Perhaps it is a relative stranger, but it may turn out to be someone close at hand, perhaps a strange relative, or someone you see every day but have long since stopped really seeing. And some of us may just discover that it is ourselves that we have put in a box, and not allowed to flourish. Whoever it is, wouldn’t it be wonderful if we encouraged all of God’s children to step out of the box, and to live into the fullness of their being. We might even join in a rousing chorus of “This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine, let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.” You never know. Amen.