

***“Here and Hereafter”***

There’s an old vaudeville shtick (later picked up by Arte Johnson and Ruth Buzzi on ”Laugh-In”) in which “the dirty old man” says to “the sweet young thing”: “*Do you believe in the hereafter?*” “*Oh, my, yes.*” “*Well then, your should know what I’m here after.*”

Do you believe in the hereafter? The overwhelming majority of people in this country say, “Yes.” But what they believe about the hereafter, and what they think will happen hereafter, varies widely. Some will use today’s Gospel to try to come to grips with this topic, and in so doing will mess up both the parable and the concept of what awaits us hereafter.

Many will use this account to undergird the notion of an immediate judgment. Lazarus goes to heaven; the rich man to hell. Not so fast. First, Lazarus goes to be “with Abraham” a Semitic concept akin to “being gathered to one’s ancestors;” in simpler words, he dies and is buried. Second, the rich man winds up in Hades (more on that anon).

Many will say that the judgment is grounded in the lifestyles of these two men; in other words, we will be judged by how we live, what we do. No such message is delivered here, other than to affirm that many have their leisure here and others may find it only hereafter — but that’s not the same as reward and punishment.

So much for this being a treatise on the hereafter.

As you listened to the readings this morning, I wonder if you had a reaction that I did as I read them during this week. Beginning with Amos (and indeed most of the prophets repeat this refrain) and ending in Jesus (as all things must) — it appears that God is on the side of the poor. Or would it be more fair to say that God opposes the rich? Amos: “***Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall; who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, and like David improvise on instruments of music; who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the***

*finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!”* Then St. Paul: “. . . *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 with many pains.*”

Jesus’ parable of the Rich Man and Poor Lazarus (whose name literally means “God helps”) shows a contrasting view of the rich and the poor, perhaps most notably in how Jesus talks of their deaths: Lazarus is “carried away by the angels;” the rich man is interred. Lazarus is brought to “the bosom of Abraham” (KJV); the rich man is in Hades, originally a name from Greek mythology for the god the Romans named Pluton, but later (as here) Hades was used to name the realm of the unblessed dead.

These are illustrative of a point of view that would appear to place God firmly on the side of the poor. The rich come off as callous, indifferent, self-absorbed, mean-spirited, and haughty. Know anybody like that? If not personally, just look at any issue of People magazine and you’ll discover a whole world of such dilettantes. The poor, on the other hand, are portrayed as noble, longsuffering, pious, and kindly (have you ever read a fairy tale in which the poor woodsman, carpenter, farmer, cobbler, or puppeteer was not described as “kindly”?). With such paradigms, how can we deny that God is on the side of the poor?

Except . . . If God is on the side of the poor, why does He allow the rich to be rich? In Jesus’ day, it was a “given” that riches were a sign of God’s blessing. The rich obviously had God’s favor, that’s why they are rich. What more proof could you want? Wealth equals blessing. End of discussion.

Is that too far off from our cultural viewpoint? Are not the rich viewed as better, not just financially, but morally? Are we not inclined to talk (because we think) of wealth as a blessing? Is there anyone here who would, out of hand, turn up your nose at one million dollars? Half a million? \$ 100,000? No, were such a windfall come to our house, we

would rejoice in the mercy and grace of God (and we would, of course, make sure that a goodly part of it was invested in Kingdom work by a generous donation to the church of our choice . . . that was “of course”). Such an influx of cash would indeed be seen as a blessing from God (although you may want to study the histories of those who have won the lottery, where you’ll discover that such new-found wealth more often than not left their lives in disarray). .

So, if it is true that wealth is blessing, why does it seem in today’s lessons that the rich are being, in some sense, picked upon? Why does Amos, speaking for God, come down so hard on them? Why does Paul spend a good deal of his letter to Timothy with warnings about wealth? And clearly the Rich Man in Jesus’ parable has virtually nothing to commend him. Why?

I believe the answer is this: God *is* on the side of the poor. He is also on the side of the rich. The difficulty lies in how each group sides with God. Both poverty and wealth can drive us away from God. Good financial times are just as dangerous to spiritual health as are bad financial times. When we experience hard times, we are tempted to turn away from God. We are tempted to believe that He is the cause of our grief; He doesn’t care about what happens to us; He plays games with our lives, constantly throwing obstacles in our path toward the pursuit of happiness; He gives what should be ours to another — how unfair is that? Many is the time I have sat with someone going through a particularly bad financial crisis and heard something like, “*Why is God doing this to me?*”

That question almost never comes up when we are in boom times. But that doesn’t mean that other temptations do not draw alongside us. With wealth comes a sense of self-sufficiency, and the temptation to think that we no longer need God. Money, we are told, will cover a multitude of problems — and there is evidence to suggest that, if we have enough money, problems will be at a minimum. We may render lip service to God, but at the heart of wealth is the lie: “*This is all for me, just for me.*”

Accordingly, Amos, St. Paul, and Jesus all agree that wealth poses the

greater risk. Because they are poor, the poor have fewer places to turn in their anxiety and distress, and so look to God. The rich, because they have many options, may continue to live as if God were not really necessary.

Now, every one of you could raise the objection: *“Pastor, I have known some people of wealth who were, in fact, devout and active Christians. And I have encountered some poor people who are dirty, rotten scoundrels.”* Yes, I have thus far spoken as if all rich are this, and all poor are that, and that does distort the picture. I, too, have known some wonderful Christians who happen to be well off. And I have known some people in poverty who I wouldn’t want to spend more than a minimal amount of time with. What I have been pointing to, however, is not whether or not there are exceptions to these “rules” (if that’s what they are??). The point is that we are all subject to the temptation to let our financial circumstances lead us away from God, and, on balance, the witness of the Scriptures says that the threat of wealth to our relationship with God seems to be more powerful than the threat of poverty.

The questions before us, then, are: *“Why is that?”* and *“What, if anything, should we do about it?”* Let’s look carefully at the parable Jesus gives us in today’s Gospel.

*“There was a rich man . . .”* and to make sure we get the picture of how rich he was, Jesus adds: *“Dressed in purple . . .”* a rare commodity, usually reserved for nobility, so this guy thinks of himself (and wishes others to think of him) as royalty. *“. . . and fine linen”* the contemporary equivalent would be an Armani suit, which (I looked on the Internet, so I know) starts at about \$1,500 and up, mostly up. *“and who feasted sumptuously every day.”* This guy did not shop at Aldi’s. It was Heinen’s, all the way, with imports from as many places as he could find. \$500 bottles of wine were no rarity on his menu. His cholesterol must have been off the chart.

*“. . . at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus . . .”* The Greek actually says that this man was “dumped” at the gate; apparently some friend or

relative would get him there daily. We should note that this poor man has a name, while the rich man does not (although down through history, some people simply cannot leave that alone, and have been given to call the rich man by the name “Dives,” which is the Latin word for “rich”). Lazarus was *“covered with sores;”* the poor often are prone to poor health, poor diets, and poor living conditions often resulting in poorly functioning bodies. He *“longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table”* — a more literal translation would lead us to see that Jesus describes this poor man as willing to graze like a cow at the rich man’s leftovers, another way to describe his degradation. And as a final insult *“even the dogs would come and lick his sores.”* I have actually read some commentators who suggest this is a hidden blessing, the one good thing in the man’s life, on the assumption that dog saliva has antiseptic qualities! Rubbish. The point of this last descriptor is to emphasize that the rich man’s dogs know more about Lazarus’ plight than does the rich man.

Before we get to what happens to either of these characters, let’s make sure we understand what Jesus has set up here. The rich man is not antagonistic or unnecessarily cruel to Lazarus; he does not, for instance, send his servants to chase Lazarus off the property. [Talk to some people who live downtown in any major city in America and ask about their comfort level with the homeless settling in for the night on their front stoop.] Nor does he taunt Lazarus about his poverty — *“Ha Ha, Lazarus, See this nice juicy T-bone? Mmmmm, sure is tasty. Want a bite? Too bad!”* No, Jesus’ shows us the real problem: The rich man is unaware of, and thus indifferent to, Lazarus and his plight. This, in Jesus’ estimation, is the rich man’s dereliction.

The rich man dies, is buried, and winds up in Hades. Lazarus is carried by angels to Abraham’s bosom. In other words, the rich man goes off to a bad place, Lazarus to a good. Because? *“Ah,”* (as Hamlet said) *“there’s the rub.”* Jesus gives us no indication that wealth or poverty here has anything to do with either man’s disposition hereafter.

So listen carefully to the conversation between Abraham and the rich

man. The rich man calls him ***“Father Abraham”*** and he, in turn is called ***“child”*** — if he were indeed a child of Abraham, he would have been attentive to the covenantal relationship with God that such status imposed on him. Jesus is making us think back to the words of John the Baptist: ***“Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father;’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.”*** Being a “child of Abraham”, apparently, is not enough — nor is being “Lutheran” or even “Christian.” The real indicator in this conversation is the attitude of the rich man — even in Hades he thinks he is calling the shots. He starts telling Abraham what to do: send Lazarus (still thinks of himself as better); send someone to my brothers.

This is another warning about wealth: it can be self-delusional. It can delude us into thinking we control what is beyond our control. So Abraham points him back. First back to ***“remember”*** — the disparity between himself and Lazarus (so evidently, the rich man was not ignorant of Lazarus’ plight, he just didn’t care to do anything about it). Then back to ***“They have Moses and the prophets . . .”*** (we would have to add, ***“and the Gospels and Epistles”***); God’s Word is really all we need to know to understand what God expects of us. And this is what appears to be the central point of this parable.

How can we sum up this parable? Let me give it a shot. To free Lazarus from hunger, you can provide food. To free him from disease, you can provide doctors and medicine. To free him from the elements, you can provide clothing and shelter. But what about the rich man, how do you free him from selfish greed and an uncaring attitude? The answer: You provide opportunities for sharing his wealth.

In very simple terms, that is Luke's (and I might add that of Amos, St. Paul and Jesus, as well) whole message to the rich — share your wealth. Give some of it away. That’s why God gave it to you. Don't keep it all for yourself. Greed is concerned with getting. The Gospel is concerned with giving. Just as Lazarus (or any poor person) may need food and clothing and shelter for a more satisfying life, so the rich need to be freed from

selfish greed for a more satisfying life. If one's whole life is centered on getting more for self (greed) — that person can never be satisfied. There will always be something more to get. Enough is never enough. There will be something bigger and better that can be bought.

There is, however, one thing of which we should encourage rich and poor to want more: God's Word. When Abraham tells the rich man that his brothers have that word, and that it is here and now more powerful than even visits from the hereafter, he is reminding the rich man that he had neglected that word in his quest for more. How do you minister to wealthy people? [And nearly all Americans are wealthy by the world's standards.] You invite them to become immersed in God's Word. You help them grow into a deeper and stronger relationship with Christ through that Word. Then you give them opportunities to share with others who aren't so fortunate.

Giving brings new life in two ways: It frees the giver from greed and it brings exciting, new opportunities for the recipients. It enables you here to express your faith in what lies hereafter.

We need also to remember that Jesus said, ***“Where your treasure is, there your heart will be”*** (Luke 12:34). [That's another sermon for another day.]

Amen.