

1 Timothy 6: 6-19
Luke 16: 19-31
September 25, 2016
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

Unlike many lectionary scriptures, the passage from Paul's first letter to Timothy and Jesus' parable in Luke go hand in glove. Simply put, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus states the problem. Paul's teaching to Timothy guides us toward a solution.

In Luke, Jesus' hearers are his disciples and a group of religious leaders. We have already seen how these leaders condemn Jesus for meeting with tax collectors and sinners. He has told several parables placing the seeking a lost sheep, a lost coin and a lost son alongside of that criticism to highlight the yearning of God for the lost. Should not the scribes and Pharisees, who are not "lost", be filled with compassion for those who are? Why are they using their good standing with God to distance themselves from those who suffer under the burden of sin? Are they not inspired by the joy in heaven when a "good" person cares more for the pain of another human being than for her or his secure place in the heart of God and reaches out to one who is on the outside looking in?

In a parable which we did not hear, Jesus tells a parable about a dishonest steward who has been cheating his master and gets fired. He goes and makes deals with his master's debtors and returns some of what he owed. He is commended by the master, though as far as I can tell he is still fired, for using his position to make friends with those who are deep in debt. The message is in part that those who have wealth and position in this world should not take it for granted. They should make friends with the poor and the outcast and so earn a reward in heaven.

I don't think the order of these parables is accidental. Jesus begins by suggesting the religious leaders really *are not lost*. The parable of the dishonest steward suggests that maybe they are not as upright as they like to think. Then comes this parable of the rich man and Lazarus. With this story, to use a boxing image, Jesus takes his gloves off. He pulls back the comforting curtain of the religious leader's self-satisfaction and shows them their true spiritual condition.

Two people have two very different destinies in this life and the next. The one is a nameless rich man. Centuries after Jesus, someone gave him the name Dives. Translated literally the name simply means, "wealthy man." Jesus' captures the man's affluence simply and effectively: he was "dressed in purple and fine linen and feasted sumptuously every day." Purple linen was the most expensive and valued fabric in ancient times. The word "sumptuously" means lavish and at great expense, far beyond what is needed for sustaining life.

This man has a gate to limit who can enter his house. This suggests that there is a wall around the dwelling to keep unwanted people away. Outside of this gate is another man. Unlike the one inside the gate, this man has a name: Lazarus. This is not the same one who Jesus raised from the dead. Yet Jesus uses the name intentionally. Translated literally Lazarus means "without help." Jesus' description of Lazarus is as clear and evocative as that of the rich man. Lazarus. He longs for just some scraps from the rich man's table, but receives none. He is covered in sores. His only relief comes when the dogs lick the puss off of his wounds. So we have a stark contrast: a nameless rich man with more than anyone could imagine needing in five lifetimes, and one right outside his gate; a man with a name who is "without help."

Early church commentators suggest that the fact that that poor man has a name and the rich man is anonymous has deep meaning. They suggest that Lazarus has his name written in heaven. The rich man has no name written in heaven and thus is destined to hades, which in Greek simply means, "unseen world."

Between Lazarus in heaven and the rich man in hades there is an unbridgeable chasm. The rich man cries out for Lazarus to reach out with compassion to cool his tongue. This request is denied because the gulf which separates hades from the bosom of Abraham is final.

The inference is this: in life the chasm between Lazarus and the rich man *was bridgeable! The rich man could have done something about it.* What is being condemned is not that he was wealthy but that he refused to use his wealth to help the one at his gate who was "without help." Unlike the unjust steward, the rich man did not use his wealth to make friends with the poor and downtrodden. Instead he knowingly maintained a lavish lifestyle and withheld any help for those "without help." Now it is too late. He received his reward in the brief moment of his earthly life and now has an eternity of suffering and regret ahead of him with no relief. He calls for Abraham to warn his brothers but receives the reply that all the information they need is in the teaching of Moses and the prophets. Send someone from the dead to warn them. Abraham shakes his head and says, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets they will not listen to someone returning from the dead."

I wonder, how do you respond to this parable? To be honest, on one level I feel overwhelmed. I don't feel defensive as much as I am embarrassed and at a loss. I recognize that on one level this is a parable about divine justice. As Jesus taught, "The first shall be last and the last shall be first." I live in a nation which has built an economy around feasting sumptuously. I

have traveled to Malawi where there is almost no medical care and because of the recent drought, mass starvation. I have been to Arizona where people fleeing from violence and poverty are rounded up and put in prison. There is even talk of building a wall to keep these people out. How do we as Christians respond? How do we follow a spiritual path through this wilderness and avoid simplistic solutions and ideological judgments?

I believe Paul's advice to Timothy is spot on. Listen to his words:

...there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; 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 harmful desires that plunge people in to 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. But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, endurance, gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of eternal life to which you were called..

Friends, what I hear from Paul is this:

First, it is fruitless to beat ourselves up over what so many call our "privilege." That attitude only leads to guilt and resentment and increasingly, anger. Paul tells Timothy to lift his eyes off of the prospect of wealth and to pursue higher, spiritually inspired virtues. If we came into this world with nothing and cannot take anything with us that what we have is a gift. When we take our eyes off of the gift of life and start comparing what we have with others we will go off the path and lose our sense of gratitude which is the source of the greatest gift of all—contentment. Paul calls this "godliness with contentment."

Godliness is not a state of spiritual superiority. Godliness simply means that our lives point beyond ourselves to God. This happens when we experience contentment—that is the sense of gratitude and the giftedness of life. Godliness with contentment is captured perfectly

by David in the 23rd Psalm: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." The Lord is my shepherd. In him I (have everything I need. I am content.

The fruit that comes from godliness with contentment is that I become clear that I have much to share. My needs are completely met through God's gift to me of Jesus Christ who is the very perfection of godliness with contentment. As I grow in this realization I can begin to notice those at my gate who have "no help." I begin to ask, "How can I help? What can I do? Perhaps most importantly, how can I be a person with a name who learns the name of my neighbor?

I propose that as we grow spiritually in this way we build a bridge over the great chasm of separation while there is still time to do so. Amen