

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Both the gospel and this morning's epistle lesson speak to us of the difficulty that some people have with wealth, with money, with accumulating stuff.

We get all defensive about these readings. We get all fidgety with this message. God's got it out for you with your bank accounts. My train collection. Our clothes, and credit cards, and everything else. We may not think we have much...and perhaps some of us do not...but we still squirm. Because, on the one hand, we give thanks for the blessings from God that we realize are trademarks of hard work and careful planning...and yet on the other hand, we hear the message that the rich guy in the parable is burning in hell. Give thanks for blessings, while their mere possession is a sin?

OK, can we read or hear what is actually there...and NOT what we THINK that we have heard or read? There is no finger pointing in the readings. No condemnation of wealth itself. In the epistle, Paul says that it is "the love of money that is the root of all evil", and not money itself.

The message is NOT to blast those who "have". Not to make you or me feel guilt about how much you we have and to urge us to share it, or to pass go and head directly to hell. We may already generously share from the bounty God has allowed us to receive. Maybe you may not love money or seek out wealth, and may have the attitude that Paul urges upon Timothy: the attitude of godliness with contentment...one that runs from pursuit of worldly gain and pursues righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness.

But the Spirit looks to move us today...to have us to think about what true riches are, and also to think about the great divide between some people and others. A divide in this life that the scriptures suggest may be repeated in the next.

As a quick review, what do we have in the parable? The rich man...who, by the way and of no little significance, I think, is not named in the parable...this rich man crosses paths with poor Lazarus. It is clear that the rich man knew about Lazarus...refers to Lazarus by name, even after both of them have died. But notice something else: the rich man never speaks directly to Lazarus...not even from Hell where he is under torment. And, even when he is in Hell, he still expects Lazarus to serve him: "Father Abraham," he calls out, "send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue for I am in agony in these flames." And then again, "Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house that he may warn them so that they will not also come into this place of torment."

Then, as now, it is all about him. He still has not changed how he treats Lazarus. The divide that separated them in life continues after they died. The rich man kept Lazarus at a distance and, now that he is in deep doo doo, he expects Lazarus to cross that distance to help him. Nice attitude.

It is highly unlikely that any of us has a poor person at the end of our driveway waiting for the dirty crumbs from our tables. And as I said, this is not a guilt trip message. But, if we think that this

story really has little or nothing to say to us, then we have taken the first step toward becoming like the rich man. So, we start to ask the questions. How am I like the rich man? Who is it I ignore, or treat as less than fully human?

This is hard stuff...especially since we are aware that there is a lot of need out there, that we have only so much time, only so much money, only so much compassion. The whole passage is distressing, even for those who share their time, give their money, and spend their compassion on the poor and needy within our town and around the world.

It is probably more fair to conclude that most, if not all of you, speak with those who have a different station in life. But also...hopefully...that you do not regard street people as your inferiors or treat those on welfare as your servants...like that priest I mentioned two weeks ago about the “dregs and scum of Rome”. That you do care about the poor of our community and of our world. That you give to funds of the church that support much needed relief and development work around the world. That you have donated time, money and resources in the mission of the church and in other local efforts. That you pray each week, if not each day, for folks like the people of Ukraine, or people with terrible lingering side effects from COVID, the oppressed and the homeless. And on top of all this, that you otherwise give your income as the Spirit leads you, knowing that what you give to God through the church and/or other genuine charities will indeed be blessed by God and used to not only run this sacred place but to do many good works in the name of God.

But the parable still is difficult for most of us here. It is always the wrong people...it is always the saints who are most aware of their shortcomings. It is always the holy who wonder, “Have I done all I can do? Am I being too self-centered? Am I putting my family and its comfort way too far ahead of everyone else?”

I think that, as usual, we tend to look at, or consider scripture, with too narrow a lens. Just having money or possessions is not really the focus here. Money is only an icon. A symbol. As I often say to my colleagues in court, in criticism of what we are talking about in the world around us...and what they tell me they will etch on my tombstone...(quote) It’s never love. It’s always money (unquote). And the word “money” can be replaced by some other synonym representative of death in the world...so “it’s always power”, or “it’s always fear”, or “it’s always domination”. You get the idea. The concept of being dependent upon one’s self, instead of God.

At the end of their lives, the rich man’s hands were full and the poor man’s hands were empty. The rich man was clinging to his wealth, his power, his prosperity, and needed nothing. Self-sufficient in every sense of the world, thinking he was invincible. When Muhammed Ali was at the height of his boxing career, he was on a commercial airline, and upon take-off, the flight attendant asked Ali to put on his seat belt, but Ali refused. “The plane will not take off until you put on your seat belt” the flight attendant warned. Ali stood up and said “I am Superman, and Superman don’t need no seat belt!” And the attendant said “And Superman don’t need no plane, neither!”

On the other hand, at death, the poor man’s hands were empty. No house, no money, no titles,

nothing. He had need of everything...including the gifts that God could give...so his hands were open wide, and he gratefully received the gift of grace.

The parable is about choices in coming to God. Either clinging to all our worldly stuff with full hands and empty hearts...or we can come to God without anything; humble, broken, needy. We come with empty hands, asking for God to bless us. Think of that this morning when we come forward to the table for Holy Communion...coming forward “empty handed”, even though you have change in your purse or Benjamins in your wallet. Coming forth with humility, and with need....for healing, and hope, and the Gift of Life itself.

And finally, the parable of Jesus ends with this. Finally, for the first time in the story, the rich man is concerned for someone other than himself, the five brothers. No, says Abraham in the story...if they have not accepted the messengers on earth, they are not going to believe someone who rises from the dead. Jesus is probably referring to himself, and that fact that, even after the resurrection, there were many who would not believe in him.

What a mess. Five brothers, wealthy and proud just like he was, racing through life with reckless abandon, clinging tightly to their possessions, unaware of the tragic future that awaits them. And nobody to tell them the truth. Those five brothers still live today. They are everywhere, all around us. People who do not know the truth about God’s grace, and if they are not ready to die and stand before the judgment of God, then they are all lost, just like those five brothers. Who will tell them? Who will speak to them the message of forgiveness, and life, and love, so that they are not lost anymore?

Well, look in the mirror...that would be us. The only reason really that we are here in the first place. It is what we are called to do. This parish has a wonderful mission statement, and in its most basic form it really says, “God cares about lost people, and so do we.”

There are many lost people in our community and in our circles of influence, who do not know Jesus as the Christ, in the particularly private, subtle, understated and yet completely fulfilling ways as we do in the Episcopal tradition. In fact, in this parable, we do the old switcheroo...WE are the wealthy ones, wearing the purple robes of royalty, feasting on bread and wine and grace. And these lost ones are lying at the gate, and though their hands may be full, their hearts are empty. They are looking for something, not even sure what it is. And we have it. We have what they are seeking. Paul Tillich said it this way, “A Christian is simply one beggar telling another beggar where to find food.”

We like God’s food with the particular seasoning and spices that we enjoy around this particular table. Filling. Nutritious. But always abundant and with great variety. Low fat Episcopalian, I guess you could call it...low on sugary carbs but high on protein. The bread and wine and grace of an eternally faithful and loving God, always sustaining us in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.