

Rich and Poor
I Timothy 6:6-19
Luke 16:19-31

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus....”

In order to hear the truth a parable has to tell, you have to inhabit the world the parable creates. That is what we are going to try this morning. After a few non sequiturs in Luke’s sixteenth chapter about wealth, the law, and divorce, Jesus says, “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day.” Jesus begins with a type of man, a man who wore hedonism on his sleeve. “He does not merely have extraordinary wealth,” Amy-Jill Levine says. “He ostentatiously displays it.” To translate his first century flagrant love of money into the twenty-first century, consider again the CEO of Wells Fargo and Elizabeth Warren’s withering examination of him this week.

The senator first asked if his taking full responsibility for the culture at the bank, a culture that led employees to meet their quota of sales by falsifying applications for credit card accounts over a multitude of years, meant firing senior management and resigning himself. Not. She then went on to note that the value of the rich man’s stock during the years of his company’s fraud netted the rich man about \$200 million in gains. “There was a rich man who dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day.” That rich.

“And at his gate,” Jesus continues, “lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table.” Warren goes on to say, “You know, here is what gets me about this. If one of your tellers took a handful of \$20 bills out of the cash drawer, they probably would be looking at criminal charges of theft. They could end up in prison. But you squeezed your employees to the breaking point so they would cheat customers and you could drive up the value of your stock and put hundreds of millions of dollars in your own pocket. And when it all blew up you kept your job, you kept your multimillion dollar bonuses and you went on television to blame thousands of \$12 an hour employees who were just trying to meet cross-sell quotas that made you rich.” (This is a stretch, but because the rich man in the parable knows Lazarus’ name, I wonder if Lazarus had been an indentured servant on the rich man’s property who was fired for stealing the food that fell from the rich man’s table.)

Lazarus, by the way, is the only named character in all of Jesus’ parables. Think about that. There are fathers and sons, shepherds and farmers, widows and judges, laborers and managers. The poor man’s name means “God helps.” With the exception of the dogs who healed his sores with their saliva, Lazarus apparently had no help in life but God. As rich the rich man was, Lazarus was unimaginably poor. No doubt, we bring to his first century economic condition a truckload of surmises from the twenty-first century that are not supported in the world of the parable. “Luke’s parable doesn’t say, for example, if Lazarus was deserving or lazy, drug-addicted, mentally ill, or a good Joe down on his luck,” Mary Luti notes, an early Christian historian.

Also, Lazarus is silent throughout the parable. I think this is not by chance. The poorest of the poor have no voice. Usually they are also invisible. Except in the world of the parable Lazarus is at the gate of the rich man. Every time the rich man enters or leaves his property, Lazarus is lying in the way of his coming and going, as well as in the way of those who fancy themselves on the way to the rich man’s table. But the rich man neither hears him nor sees him.

I have been reading two books in a desperate attempt to understand the root causes that keeps Lazarus at our gate even as you will see and hear Lazarus at our gate this afternoon in Our Brothers’ Place or eat with our PIHN guests at First Germantown this week. They are books that trace the history of race and class in America through slavery, reconstruction, Jim Crow and now mass incarceration in the black community and, in the white community, through indentured servants from England to clay-eaters and crackers in the nineteenth century, trailer trash and rednecks in the twentieth century and the Honey Boo Boo reality television of today. When I translate the first century parable into the twenty-first century world I know, I locate myself, if not behind the gate, then now and again as one invited through the gate, dressed in purple and fine linen, to feast splendidly. Like the rich man, I live effectively not seeing the human beings with names who lie beneath the class I am working so hard to inhabit. “The discomfort middle-class Americans feel when forced to acknowledge the existence of poverty highlights the disconnect,” Nancy Isenberg writes in her history of class in America, “between image and reality. It seems we have made little progress since James Agee exposed the world of poor sharecroppers in 1941. We still today are blind to the ‘cruel radiance of what is.’ ... Seeing the poor [if ever we do and if ever we do more than blame their character for their lot]... we have to wonder how such people exist amid plenty.”

Mostly they barely exist and die a good decade before we do. “The poor man died,” Jesus continues. Stop. One day he simply disappears from sight, a relief to those who had to avert their eyes on the way to Burberry’s or Tiffany’s

or Barney's or Lagos or dinner at Alma de Cuba. Jesus does not stop, however. "The poor man dies and is carried away by the angels to be with Abraham." Whether immediately or a decade later, "the rich man also dies and is buried." Period. No angels escorting him to his heavenly home? Not on your life. The parable is a parable of reversal and most parables of reversal are polar reversals in which, one way or another, not only do the first become last, but the last also become first, overturning the world, and leaving the hearers "standing firmly on utter uncertainty," according to John Dominic Crossan. "The parables of reversal intend to do precisely this to our security," Crossan insists, "because such is the advent of the Kingdom."

The rich man finds himself in Hades where he is tormented. A big part of what torments him is seeing Lazarus in the bosom of Abraham. Early Jewish views of the afterlife imagined that the saved and the damned could see one another. "Look now," says the Most High in one text, "and understand what you have denied, whom you have not served, whose commandments you have despised." But the rich man's character has been stamped indelibly with his privilege. He calls out to Abraham, "Have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames."

The rich man's audacious command brings to mind a letter circulating on social media dated August 7, 1865, written by a freed slave named Jourdon Anderson. Jourdon Anderson's former master had written him shortly after the end of the Civil War, asking him to return from Ohio to work on the plantation in Big Spring, Tennessee and rescue his ailing business. After sending greetings to everyone he left behind and sharing a bit about his new life, Mr. Jourdon Anderson asks Mr. Patrick Henry Anderson to write and say what wages he will pay him, to help him decide. Then he adds that his wife, Mandy, "says she would be afraid to go back without some proof that you were disposed to treat us justly and kindly; and we have concluded to test your sincerity by asking you to send us our wages for the time we served you. This will make us forget and forgive old scores and rely on your justice and friendship in the future. I served you for thirty-two years and Mandy twenty years. At twenty-five dollars a month for me and two dollars a week for Mandy, our earnings would amount to eleven thousand six hundred and eighty dollars." Adding interest and subtracting the cost of clothing, three doctor's visits and a pulled tooth, he suggests a check be sent Adam's Express, care of V. Winters Esq., Dayton, Ohio. Then Mr. Jourdon Anderson concludes: "We trust the good Maker has opened your eyes to the wrongs which you and your fathers have done to me and my fathers, in making us toil for generations without recompense. Surely there will be a day of reckoning for those who defraud the laborer of his hire. Say howdy to George Carter, and thank him for taking the pistol from you when you were shooting at me. From your old servant, Jourdon Anderson."

Warren ended her questioning of Wells Fargo's CEO by bemoaning the fact that there are no consequences, in this life, for the likes of this twenty-first century rich man. Apparently nothing has changed in 2000 years! As Abraham tenderly explained to the rich man in the parable, "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us." Put more succinctly, the Kingdom is at stake in our everyday lives, eternity on the line around the kitchen table. Every day the rich man "refused to recognize on earth that Lazarus too was a child of Abraham and so should be treated as a welcome member of his family. He had the resources; he had the opportunity; he had the commandments of Torah. He did nothing and still does nothing," Levine observes. "Instead he continues to think of Lazarus as nothing more than a servant or a dog, who is to fetch something for the master." He next wants Lazarus sent to his five brothers to warn them. "They have Moses and the prophets," Abraham replies. "They should listen to them."

In his lifetime, the rich man knew the Scriptures that said: "Do not turn your face away from anyone who is poor, and the face of God will not be turned away from you. If you have many possessions, make your gift from them in proportion." I swear to goodness that in the midst of writing this sermon, John Lawton sent me these words: "Money has no character, no personality, no values. Its actions only reflect the desires of its owner. Money can build great hospitals and schools, or it can be gambled away or squandered on meaningless possessions. Money may build museums to house beautiful works of art, it may construct beautiful houses of worship — or it may be used to create instruments of war and destruction. As you build your personal wealth [or maybe as you learn to be content with food and clothing, says Paul], make sure you build your character by setting aside a portion of your income to help others....The primary beneficiary of such noble actions is always the one who gives, not the one who receives."

Lazarus, the only named character in all of Jesus' parables, means "God helps." Lazarus was God's help given to the rich man in life, the help that alone could have made him human. Lazarus is at your gate and mine; Lazarus is at the gate of this church. He does not speak but only bears witness to the Good Maker, who means to open our eyes to the child of Abraham Lazarus is, whom to see is to turn our world upside-down and inside-out. Thanks be to God.