

Proper 21 Year C— Lk. 16:19-31---Rich Man and Lazarus

At the beginning of the twentieth century, pilgrims visiting Poland were often told to stop and see the saintly rabbi whose name was Israel Kagan—more commonly known as the “Chafetz Chaim.” One day, two pilgrims who were visiting were surprised to see the rabbi lived in a simple, book-lined room, in which the only pieces of furniture were a table, a bench, and a bed.

“Rabbi, where’s all your furniture?” the pilgrims asked. “Why, where’s yours?” asked the rabbi in reply. “Ours? But we’re just passing through,” they said. “So am I,” said the rabbi, “so am I.”

Today’s parable is one in a series of passages from Luke about wealth and poverty. A rich man dressed in purple and fine linen who feasted sumptuously every day ignored a poor man named Lazarus, who lay right at the rich man’s gate. Well, we can probably all name some of the problems stemming from love of money. One is that desire for money tends to be insatiable. There is a Roman proverb: “Wealth is like sea water; so far from quenching thirst, it intensifies it. The more one gets, the more one wants.” Another is that the desire for wealth is founded on the illusion that wealth can buy security. Actually, wealth tends to cause anxiety. When I was in college, I got a summer job working for the second wealthiest couple in Santa Barbara. The wife had made a fortune on a popular brand of tuna. The husband, or so the gossip went, had married her for her money. As a lowly kitchen assistant, I never got to see the riches, but I heard that the entire basement level of the mansion where the couple lived was filled with silverware and china. For fear that the riches would be stolen, the couple hired security guards around the clock. They were a really anxious and unhappy-looking pair.

Wealth also tends to make people selfish. If a person is driven by a desire for wealth, it may be nothing to him or her that another person is being unjustly underpaid or abused. Finally, love of money can lead one into dishonest ways of getting it.

With all this, it is important to remember that nowhere does the Bible say it is a sin to be rich. There is no special virtue in and of itself in being poor. Significantly, Luke charges the rich man with no crime and assigns the beggar no virtue. Jesus had wealthy friends as well as poor. To

Luke, current social conditions—the existence of hopeless poverty alongside the luxury of the rich will undergo a radical change when God rules the world completely. Money in itself is neither good nor bad; but the love of it may lead to evil. With it a person may selfishly serve his or her own desires; with it, he or she may answer the cry of a neighbor’s need. Like all major religions, Christianity pleads for concentration on things which are permanent rather than ephemeral. We brought nothing into the world and we can take nothing out of it. As the proverb goes: “There are no pockets in a shroud.”

As a religious, I have had the rather unusual privilege of living without personal money. But for us, there is the question of personal time. How generous are we with our time and talent as well as with whatever we may own? How do we acquire what we have? How do we use what we have? To whom do we consider ourselves accountable in its use? Generosity, I know, is at the heart of the Gospel. In the time before time, the Bible suggests that God said, “This wonder of aliveness is too good to keep to myself. I want others to get in on this joy and experience this wonder.” Creation is at bottom an act of generosity—God sharing the bounty of what he was and what he had. Sometimes I have to stop and feel whether I am being stingy or generous. I know I am being stingy when I feel closed and cramped and rigid. Generosity, on the other hand, feels open, even expansive, and free. It is one of the great joys of life to see how our generosity can bless other people.

Our former bishop Mark Beckwith said “Our value is determined by what we share rather than by what we accumulate.” The rich man in our parable today is not condemned because he is rich. He is condemned because he ignores the poor man Lazarus. I would like to end as I began with a Jewish parable. It was told by an old rabbi. This is a legend, which like all good legends has more than one version. “A farmer had two sons. The father was an ideal mentor. He took his boys to the fields as soon as they were big enough to walk and taught them all he knew about farming. When he died, instead of dividing their inheritance, they continued to work together in partnership, each contributing his best gifts and dividing every harvest down the middle. One of the brothers married and had eight children; the other remained a bachelor.

One night, during a particularly bountiful harvest, the bachelor brother thought to himself, “My brother has ten mouths to feed and I have only one. He really needs more of this harvest than I do. However, I know him. He is much too fair to renegotiate our agreement. I

know what I will do. I'll take some of my harvest and slip it over in his barn at night so he can have more for his family.”

At the same time, the married brother was thinking to himself, “God has blessed me with this fine family. My children will take care of us when I am old. My brother is not as fortunate. He really needs more of this harvest to provide for his old age, but I know him. He is far too fair to renegotiate our agreement. I know what I will do. I'll take some of my harvest and slip it into his barn to build up a nest egg for the future.”

As you might have anticipated, one night when the moon was full these brothers came face-to-face, each on a mission of generosity. The old rabbi said that although there was not a cloud in the sky, a gentle rain began to fall. Do you know what it was? It was God weeping for joy because two of his children had gotten the point. Those who love God are generous toward their brothers and sisters.