

Last Sunday Megan preached about Jesus' parable of the shrewd manager, found in chapter 16 of Luke's gospel. That parable ends with the punchline "You cannot serve God and wealth."

The very next verse says,

<sup>14</sup> The Pharisees, who were money-lovers, heard all this and sneered at Jesus.

Now even though the Pharisees often appear in the gospels as opponents of Jesus, this sounds like the storyteller employing a bit of dramatic hyperbole. It's unlikely that loving money was required for becoming a Pharisee, and I doubt that every single Pharisee would have been abnormally attracted to wealth. Still, that religious group *looked* to the gospel writer like a community that loved money. And Jesus asserts that what they value is antithetical to what God values.

So a few verses later Jesus launches another parable about wealth. Let's all listen for God's word to us from Luke 16:19-31 (CEB).

<sup>19</sup> [Jesus said,] "There was a certain rich man who clothed himself in purple and fine linen, and who feasted luxuriously every day.

<sup>20</sup> At his gate lay a certain poor man named Lazarus who was covered with sores. <sup>21</sup> Lazarus longed to eat the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table. Instead, dogs would come and lick his sores.

<sup>22</sup> "The poor man died and was carried by angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. <sup>23</sup> While being tormented in the place of the dead, he looked up and saw Abraham at a distance with Lazarus at his side. <sup>24</sup> He shouted, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me. Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I'm suffering in this flame.'

<sup>25</sup> But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received good things, whereas Lazarus received terrible things. Now Lazarus is being comforted and you are in great pain. <sup>26</sup> Moreover, a great crevasse has been fixed between us and you. Those who wish to cross over from here to you cannot. Neither can anyone cross from there to us.'

<sup>27</sup> "The rich man said, 'Then I beg you, Father, send Lazarus to my father's house. <sup>28</sup> I have five brothers. He needs to warn them so that they don't come to this place of agony.'

<sup>29</sup> Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets. They must listen to them.'

<sup>30</sup> The rich man said, 'No, Father Abraham! But if someone from the dead goes to them, they will change their hearts and lives.'

<sup>31</sup> Abraham said, 'If they don't listen to Moses and the Prophets, then neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead.'"

There was a certain woman who sipped champagne from a hand-blown crystal glass as she stepped onto her new superyacht, a gift from her husband for her 45<sup>th</sup> birthday. On that boat she also enjoyed a private bar, a swimming pool *for her dogs*, and of course a helicopter landing pad. Back on land she and her husband lived in a palatial California home. She ate dinners created by her personal celebrity chef. Parked in the driveway, a rainbow-colored fleet of Lamborghinis. The musician Seal came to sing “Happy Birthday” at her party.

This certain woman with over-the-top wealth is the main character in the Apple TV series *Loot*. Molly, played by Maya Rudolph, lives in layers of luxury that are incomprehensible to most of us.

Jesus creates a similar fictional character when he says, “There was a certain rich man who clothed himself in purple and fine linen, and who feasted luxuriously every day.” To Jesus’ listeners, this man also lived an incomprehensibly lavish life. “Linen underwear, imported from Egypt, was extremely expensive, as was purple cloth.”<sup>1</sup>

We meet a guy who allows only the finest things to touch his body. His clothing standards are matched only by what he puts *into* his body: such indulgent food and drink that every single day is nothing short of a feast. He lives in a gated community, cocooning himself from the noise and needs of the city.

And from the needs of his fellow humans. Like Lazarus, the man with zero wealth who lies outside the rich man’s gate. The rich man cannot claim ignorance of Lazarus’s need. Lazarus may lie at his gate for that very reason: here is someone with the means to help, even if it were just tossing table scraps.

The rich man apparently recognizes the poor man to some degree, since later in the parable, when their fortunes have been reversed, he asks for Lazarus by name. The rich man’s knowledge of what Lazarus suffered in life may be the very thing that condemns him, since the rich man never acts to share his resources.

But as Jesus’ parable reminds us, wealth cannot protect you from every kind of pain. In the first episode of that TV show *Loot*, Molly discovers that her husband is having an affair. They get divorced, leaving her still with an obscene amount of money. As she navigates heartbreak, Molly also is startled to learn that she has a charitable foundation, with a staff working hard toward equality and justice in the world. So Molly, seeking meaning in her life, decides she wants to help. At a ribbon-cutting, though, for a new women’s shelter, Molly surprises the women with “personally curated gift bags” full of luxury items that are at best tone-deaf and maybe downright offensive.

Molly’s story shows that it can take time for someone to emerge from a cocoon of privilege into an awareness of others’ needs.

Which is a struggle for the rich man in our parable. Even in an afterlife where he knows torment and Lazarus finally gets comfort, the rich man still sees Lazarus as a potential errand boy he’d like

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<sup>1</sup> Malina, Bruce J. and Richard L. Rohrbaugh. *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2003. p. 295.

to order around. “Abraham, send Lazarus to cool my tongue!” “Send him to my brothers. He needs to warn them!”

Characters like Molly and this rich man present us with images of shockingly great wealth. We might be tempted to see them as extreme individuals rather than as symptoms of larger systems in which wealth begets wealth and privilege reinforces privilege. The same systems which can perpetuate generational poverty.

One theological temptation for Christians is to individualize our faith. Yes, Jesus calls individuals, and God desires to be in relationship with each of us. Yet throughout his ministry Jesus also calls individuals into *community*, gathering those who believe and those who want to believe into his new family of faith. The early church continued to congregate in synagogues and homes. And they affirmed early on that when one part of the body suffered, the rest of the church was responsible to pool their resources and offer care.

From Moses and the prophets through Jesus and beyond, it’s clear that God cares for people not only as individuals, but God also cares for how we live together. In the book of Deuteronomy we hear “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land” and “If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns...do not be hardhearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor.”<sup>2</sup> It’s possible to interpret the rich man’s failure here as individualism. Am I my brother’s keeper? Sorry but no, that guy will have to work things out on his own.

So in this life poor Lazarus continues with the dogs as his only comfort and community. The rich man knew that, and did nothing. And in the end, he gets judged for it.

That judgment imagery might be the hardest part of this parable, no? Jesus just says that the man was rich, not that he was flat-out evil. So how do we deal with the guy ending up being tortured in Hades, the place of the dead? Well, as we noted, the rich man had knowledge of Lazarus’s needs but he didn’t extend a hand to help. The story emphasizes that God *requires* the application of wealth to situations of need. It’s not optional, according to Jesus. The rich man sinned by omission.

Still, how could we in good conscience worship a God who tortures people? One of my college professors, Bible scholar John Linton, called parables like this “impossible possibilities.” Parables are invented stories told for a purpose. Maybe Jesus’ purpose with this one is to jolt us out of complacency, to propel us to join God in lavish giving, giving that meets people’s desperate needs *in this world*. If we listen to the consistent message of Moses, the prophets, and Jesus, we’ll do our best to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. And we can leave the mysteries of the *next world* in the hands of the radically loving God who comes to us in Jesus.

This week a colleague told me about another local church that does vital ministry in an underserved community but can only afford to pay their pastor minimally. They also meet in a building that’s in desperate need of repairs. And that got me wondering. From *that church’s*

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<sup>2</sup> Deut 15:11 and 15:7, as rendered by Amy Jill Levine in *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*. New York: Harper Collins, 2014. pp. 270, 252-3.

perspective, would Highland Presbyterian look like the rich man in the parable? Might we seem to exist in layers of incomprehensible wealth? What's it like to sit outside *our* gates?

This afternoon, by the way, it'll be plenty fun right outside the church! PresFest is a great opportunity for us the church to spill out our doors and mingle with the city around us. What a delight to share with all our neighbors food and music and playtime. We're using some of the church's resources to bring joy into God's world, and that's a ministry that's never a waste.

And as Christ's church, when we learn about siblings living in need, that compels us to act, to be transformed. This is already our motivation for giving away, through our Church in the World team, a substantial portion of our budget each year. We could build on that tradition. Scripture's call to bridge the chasms between the wealthy and the poor is never a once and done deal. Each time we encounter this parable, Moses, the prophets, and Jesus summon us again to discern a creative response for this time and place.

We at Highland are incredibly fortunate to have the gift of a congregational endowment that's grown over time to around \$20 million. That money has been invested and tended carefully, and it benefits us. Our wise finance folks have created a sustainable system whereby each year we take a set portion of the endowment's proceeds and that helps to fund all the ministries of this church. That endowment income joins with our collective pledges and giving, and together they fund the majority of our annual budget.

So what if *as a church community* we freshly applied the lessons of this parable? What if each year when we calculate our endowment proceeds we first set aside a tithe, 10% of that income, and we give that money, no strings attached, to a financially disadvantaged sister church?

From my rough calculations that amount might pay for a pastor's salary, or could provide a lot of building maintenance, or could help meet whatever their most pressing need might be.

Or what if we used an endowment tithe to buy and erase medical debt? We could join the growing trend of churches doing just that and liberating families from the crushing load of debt, and we could do it in the name of Lazarus, the man lying in the street with sores.

If we did something like either of those ideas, it would require of us a churchwide commitment to faithfulness. Because to make up for a little bit less endowment income in each year's church budget, you and I would need to pledge a little more, contribute more as we're able. Would it be doable? I believe it would. Would it help renew us as a church? I believe it could. Would we be taking seriously the challenge of Jesus' parable? I'd love to have us talk about that together.

The parable closes with Abraham saying, "If they don't listen to Moses and the Prophets, then neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead." Perhaps, but the God of resurrection will give it a try anyway, when the crucified parable-teller himself *rises* in the most incomprehensible and hope-filled reversal of fortune.

In the name of the God the Giver,  
God the Gift,  
and God the Generous Spirit.