

Provoked by the Parables at Brentwood Presbyterian

Dives and Lazarus

**May 8, 2011
The Lord's Supper**

**Psalm 116:1-4 & 12-19 & Luke 16:19-31
(Hymns –296, 712, 530, 563)**

People have been confused by this parable for years.
Many interpreters have focused on the wrong thing.
The right thing is the message, not the setting.

The setting is life-after-death and the judgement that comes there.
The message is pay attention to the poor.
This is a parable about the use and abuse of wealth,
not about the nature of the afterlife,
other than to emphasize that humans will be judged
for what they do in the present and the consequences will be serious.

The parable attacks a particular kind of wealth –
wealth that refuses to see the suffering caused by poverty and inequity.
It draws on a rich Biblical tradition
of seeing wealth and prosperity as a gift from God
to be used in ways God desires.
We are stewards, not owners, of wealth.
We are blessed with resources in order to use them
in the service of God's kingdom.

Remember, it is the kingdom that is the focus of the parables,
stories about how to live with God
in grateful response for what God's love has done for us in Jesus Christ.
If we enjoy wealth of any kind,
it is to be used to serve what God delights to see
his beloved human beings doing –
loving, seeking justice, and being righteous (Jer 9:24),
doing what is just, showing constant love, and walking humbly with your God
(Micah 6:8).

This kind of stewardship is at the heart of the Law and the prophets.
Jesus picks up this central theme of Judaism
and re-emphasizes it in his teachings and parables.

It is a theme that was central in the writings of John Calvin as well.
Calvin is the founding theologian
of the Presbyterian or Reformed tradition of interpreting Christianity.
He lived in Geneva during the 1500s,
a time of rapid urban and commercial development.
He saw wealth as a trust from God.
Its use was to be governed by two principles –
equity and concern for the poor.
Is there a just and equitable distribution of wealth in society
and are the poor being cared for
and provided opportunities to acquire an equitable share of wealth?

The issue here, as it is in many of the parables,
is the willingness and ability to see a person in need and respond.
Dives' wealth blinds him to the existence of Lazarus.
He is so wrapped up in acquiring and enjoying his material wealth
that he does not even acknowledge the existence of the poor ill man at his gate.

I would be the first to acknowledge
that the complexities of the issues of wealth and poverty are bewildering.
Even those at the centre of the financial debacle
we have witnessed over the past few years
seem befuddled about what happened.
But the impact is clear -
hundreds of thousands impoverished and homeless
in the wealthiest country in the world.
At the heart of our social and political agenda should be
considerations about how to prevent this from ever happening again,
considerations about how to exercise proper stewardship over our wealth,
considerations about how to acquire and use wealth equitably and lovingly
in a globally interdependent community.

I don't have ready answers.
That's why I think we need to convene such conversations
and create space for the Holy Spirit
to guide us into greater collective wisdom on such issues.
And I hardly need to point out that
that is not happening in the current political climate of bitter partisan warfare.

We disciples of Jesus Christ,
we faithful few who are commissioned and equipped by God
to be his body on this precious earth,
perhaps we are the ones to convene the conversations,
to create the space for an authentic consideration
of the uses and abuses of wealth in a complex interdependent world.
Perhaps that is one of our callings.

The parables are designed to get people to change their behaviours,
to change the way they do things,
to change the way they think and act and influence.
This parable invites us to transform our approach to wealth,
to see it as a means of serving God's kingdom
rather than as a possession to hoard.

All meaningful positive social change begins
with a few committed early adopters
who are willing to imagine things differently.
Jesus began with twelve and their friends.
They talked while walking and resting and eating.
They imagined a world of love and justice and righteousness,
of caring for others and building just societies in companionship with God.

It was enough then,
and maybe, just maybe,
it will be enough again.

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