

Please pray with me. May the meditations of my heart and the words of my lips be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, and may you add a blessing to the hearing and understanding of this message today. Amen.

“There was a rich man . . .”

Here we go again.

Last week’s gospel from Luke started the same way.

Today, once more, Jesus is calling us to account for loving our wealth more than our neighbor.

As the familiar verse in the

1st letter to Timothy puts it,

“the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.”

We know by now that the gospel of Luke

promises over and over that the coming of God’s kingdom is going to reverse the way people have arranged the world.

From Mary’s song about the hungry being filled with good things and the rich being sent away empty,

to Jesus’ inaugural sermon declaring that

he brings good news to the poor,

Luke hammers away at the theme of poverty and wealth.

You remember that last week we

heard the parable of the rich man and the dishonest steward.

To those hearing Jesus speak, and probably to those in Luke’s community, Jesus’ teaching about wealth sounded ridiculous.

I mean, he might as well have been saying,

“Supercalifragilisticexpialocious”!

Because the popular view of the day,

especially among the rich,

was that wealth was a sign of God’s favor.

There were plenty of passages in the Hebrew scriptures to back this up.

According to this view, the gap between

rich and poor was God’s doing.

Nothing to be done about it.

But Jesus hated this way of reading scripture!

And, so do I!

Like Moses and the prophets,

Jesus insisted that God is especially concerned with the poor and needy. We heard exactly this message from the prophet Amos this morning. So, like the prophet he is, Jesus rebukes this understanding of wealth and poverty. Jesus calls them and us to learn that our lives are less about how to get into the kingdom of heaven after you die and more about how you live in the kingdom of heaven before you die.

Scholars think that Jesus adapted an ancient folk-tale that came to Palestine by way of Egypt. Jesus' version tells about a rich man who *does well* but doesn't *do good* in his lifetime. When he dies, he spends eternity in tormenting flames. Lazarus, the beggar who lived lower than a starving dog at the rich man's doorstep, enjoys eternal bliss.

I don't know about you but my heart goes out to both the rich man and Lazarus. One suffered in this world, the other in the afterlife – FOREVER.

But, our Lutheran study bible gives some insight into how this story would have been heard in the 1st century. In the bible there is a note that says the rich man could be one of the colonizers, who built new cities for themselves from taxes and tributes imposed on the Jews. Colonizers were also known to drive people off their farms, making former landowners their servants. Original readers of Luke would not have felt sorry for the rich man.

It's not hard to find ourselves in this story when we consider ourselves and our nation and our colonization history of indigenous peoples and enslavement of people of color, and the exploitation of immigrants.

When the rich man dies and ends up in purgatory, begging for mercy,

he still can't see that he didn't practice mercy when he was alive.
He still can't see Lazarus as
a human being he has sinned against.
Father Abraham has to explain it to him:
"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"
that no one can cross.

What does Father Abraham say to us
who have an opportunity to repent of
the way our ancestors treated indigenous peoples
and slaves and immigrants in this country?

Jesus tells a story that seems to have no way out.
In the end, when the rich man begs for
Lazarus to go and warn his five brothers of their peril,
because surely, they will listen to someone from the dead,
the answer is, "too late."
"If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets,"
pronounces Father Abraham,
neither will they be convinced even if
someone rises from the dead."

You and I not only have Moses and the prophets to listen to,
we also have the word of someone who *did* rise from the dead.
We have Jesus and this story.
The question is—are we convinced by him?

The truth is that the word of the one who has risen from the dead
tells us that it isn't God who has fixed the chasms in our world.
It's us.
We humans struggle to extend mercy to all of our neighbors.
We humans struggle to share the resources that would
take away the suffering of others.

There are great divides between people and

few are willing to reach out and cross that divide.
Our nation is divided -
with people entrenched in positions
for or against immigrants,
entrenched for or against the president,
for or against Israel or Palestine,
for or against evangelicals, liberals, conservatives,
entrenched for or against Christianity, Judaism, Islam or nothing,
Politically, socially, theologically and economically
there are great divides in this country.

The great divide between the haves and the have nots is
such a fixture in our view of the world that
we take it for granted.
We pay a high price for building and allowing our chasms,
not because of what God will do to us,
but because of what we have done to ourselves.

And whenever we shrug off the chasms between people,
we are the losers, because in Jesus' eyes,
we are always going to be on the wrong side of the ditch.

So, is there grace in this story, after all?
Well, consider the source.
Jesus was a poor man.
The only purple robe he ever wore was
the one the Roman soldiers put
around his shoulders to ridicule him.
He died, like Lazarus,
clothed only in his wounds.
Yet, across the great chasms
between death and life,
between haves and havenots,
between us and God,
Jesus Christ extends his hands to us.
Take hold.
Take hold of hands that
bore the weight of our human need.
As the first letter to Timothy puts it,
"Take hold of the life that really is life."

Be lifted up by these hands.
Be sustained by these hands.
We have eternal life.
And do kind things.
Overcome our indifference.
Work to overcome our prejudices.
Work to overcome our greed.
Work to cross the great chasms of our world.
We CAN do something about them.

Your pledges of time and money help us do this.
We do this not to get into heaven,
but in deep gratitude that Jesus Christ has
done for us what we could not have done and
in thankfulness for what we have been given.
Thanks be to God.
Amen.