

“STEWARDSHIP CONNECTIONS: NEIGHBORS”

I Timothy 6:6-10, 17-19; Luke 16:19-31

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This may be one of the least subtle texts in all of scripture. A rich man has a feast every day while a poor man lies by his gate hoping to get the scraps that the dogs miss. The rich man dies and can gain no relief from his suffering in Hades. Lazarus, which means, “God helps,” receives comfort at Abraham’s side.

I’ve been pondering, when I’ve had a moment, whether this story corresponds with things as they happen in our world today. Is there a similar neglect of the needs of the poor among our wealthy? Do the rich feast sumptuously in their mansions while the poor lay invisibly in our streets?

We know that the gap between rich and poor has been growing for decades. We know that wealth is becoming concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. There are volumes that have been written about the causes of this state of affairs, but maybe an amateur sociology lesson isn’t what’s needed here.

The rich man didn’t suffer in Hades because he was better at playing the market than Lazarus. He probably did have advantages and opportunities not available to Lazarus. Sherron Kay George suggests some things for which the rich man repent. “Calloused indifference,” she writes, “Acute insensitivity to poverty and injustice. Living in luxury while ignoring or avoiding contact or involvement with the poor at the gate” (*Meeting Your Neighbor*, p.34).

It’s not about the money, but we would do well to remember what I Timothy had to say, “But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction” (verse 9). One suspects that Paul isn’t just talking about people who ruin themselves in their quest for wealth, but also about those victimized by injustices committed by those eager to pad their bank accounts.

Frederick Danker, in his commentary on this parable says, “Riches per se are not condemned, but misplaced confidence can keep one from having treasure in heaven” (p.285). Clearly, his concern is for the soul of the rich man. When I think about my wealth relative to the average American, I feel pretty good about my stewardship. But when I measure it against the rest of the world, I wonder whether there aren’t some folk like Lazarus at my gate.

Archibald Hunter talks about Albert Schweitzer in connection with this parable. “When the young Albert Schweitzer contrasted the wealth of Europe with the woes and misery of Africa, he concluded that the parable of Dives [the rich man] and Lazarus was ‘spoken directly to us’. ‘We,’ he said, ‘are Dives. Out there in Africa lies wretched Lazarus. And just as Dives sinned against Lazarus because, for want of heart, he never put himself in his place and let his conscience tell him what he ought to do, so we sin against the poor at our gate.’ So Schweitzer went off to Africa” (p.112).

The distribution of wealth is a serious problem within this country and beyond its borders, But Schweitzer is right in pointing to the “want of heart” as the main thrust of the parable. It’s not about the money, it’s about the callousness and insensitivity toward the poor and the disengagement from those not belonging to our peer group. That callousness is rooted in an idea that has driven a wedge in our culture separating us one from another. Robert Putnam, of *Bowling Alone* fame, wrote in a recent book:

“The idea that one must do what is best for oneself at every turn – and that only those willing to live by this code deserve to prevail in the economy – has been translated into a subtle but powerful cultural narrative about the unimpeachable fairness of the market and the undeservingness of the poor” (p. 5).

This cultural narrative easily leads to a callousness toward the poor, to the building of gates that keep the undeserving out. It’s this cultural narrative that sees merit in success, and blame in failure. “You must do what is best for yourself.”

This might make a certain amount of sense... if it really were true that everyone had the same opportunities... if it really were a zero sum world with only so much to go around... if “self-interest” really could be “enlightened”... if working hard were enough.

We don’t know the source of Lazarus’ poverty. He may have been a very hard worker. Plenty of poor people do work hard with nothing to show for it. Robert Putnam observes the fate of that cultural icon, the American rugged individual, in today’s economy. They “struggles against the loss of identity, autonomy, and mastery,” writes Putnam, “as they are subsumed into the anonymous labor of hyper-consolidated corporate machines and forced to pool meager wages to make ends meet” (p. 3). You may not like his description of the corporate world, but this is how many workers experience the world. Alone and isolated against a callous and insensitive machine. Forced to wait by the gate for the scraps from the master’s table.

I wish this parable seemed out of place in my world, but there are rich men and women feasting sumptuously while Lazarus waits by the gate, in the lunch line at Ministry, at the warming center, in the homeless encampment. I can’t begin to enumerate all the places that people wait for a scrap of food.

This is not a subtle parable. The more I ponder it, the more disturbing I find it. I know where I belong in this story. I may not be the rich man, but I’m not Lazarus either. I walk through the gate, into the house and sit at that table most every day. I may not feast sumptuously, but I eat well. I may not ignore Lazarus, but I don’t really know his story. I may bring him scraps, but I don’t really tend to his wounds.

It’s not entirely my fault. I’m a little isolated in my own little pocket of prosperity: a nice home with a yard that keeps me busy, my church affords me some opportunity for outreach to the “poor,” but very limited at this point. I shop mostly in Portage, order a lot of things on-line, have several hobbies that don’t entail much interaction with people. Our lives do not make ministry to Lazarus convenient.

The rich man never really saw Lazarus. Even in death, he mistakes Lazarus for some whose purpose is to serve him. Even in death he remembers only his friends. He never seems to understand that he had a responsibility for the whole community. There is no longer hope for him.

There remains hope for us. There is opportunity for us yet to hear “the law and the prophets: to accept responsibility for our neighbor, to welcome the stranger, to tend to the poor, to not covet our neighbors’ things. We will need to become good stewards of the faith that we have received, good stewards of the gospel with which we have been charged, and good stewards of the resources with which we’ve been blessed.

We will need to focus less on ourselves and more on our neighbor. We will have to form connections that are not encouraged by our culture. To begin with, we will need to really see our neighbor. We will need to reject the notion of our culture that the poor are undeserving and actually listen to their story as they tell it. We will need to study the systems of our society that keep poor people in poverty, and advocate for changes that remove the roadblocks to abundant living. We will need to address the immediate needs of hunger and housing while building bridges toward self-sufficiency.

Our biggest need may be to find Lazarus. We don’t go to the same places in the normal course of our lives, but there are connections we could make better use of. More involvement with ISAAC would bring us to places of need in our community and offer insight into ways of addressing hunger, poverty, and racism. Following Bread for the World more closely would certainly connect us more closely to issues around world hunger and poverty. Engaging in mission opportunities such as Meals on Wheels, Loaves and Fishes, Housing Resources and Ministry with Community have opened up stories of our neighbors that we did not know before.

Stewardship, the season we are in, is about making connections, whether we’re talking about money, the earth, or people. But when we’re talking about people, the connection we’re talking about is loving our neighbor. That’s really where the rich man failed with Lazarus. The growing isolation and segregation encouraged by our world makes this more and more challenging. It’s a lot of work to remove the blinders placed over our eyes. But Lazarus depends on it and as the parable not so subtly teaches, so do our souls. Amen.

Resources:

Danker, Frederick W. *Jesus and the New Age: A Commentary on St. Luke’s Gospel*. Fortress Press: Philadelphia, PA, 1988

Feasting on the Word: Luke, Volume 2. Westminster John Knox. Louisville KY, 2014. (Articles by Richard F. Ward, Robert M. McClellan, and Leah P. Schade).

George, Sherron Kay. *Meeting Your Neighbor: Multiculturalism in Luke and Acts*. Presbyterian Church USA. 2000.

Hunter, Archibald M. *The Parables Then and Now*. Westminster Press: Philadelphia PA, 1971.

Putnam, Robert D. *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again*. Simon & Schuster: New York, NY 2020.