

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
26th Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 30, 2007

More Than Enough

Luke 16:19-31; 1 Timothy 6:6-19

This summer Mary Ellen and I began an experiment
with our grocery shopping,
specifically with our meat purchases.
We are trying out a sort "meat subscription service"
in which we estimate how much beef, pork, chicken and fish
we expect to consume over the next year,
buy it in advance
and have it delivered in monthly installments
to be stored in our freezer.

It turns out, as you might expect,
that we over-estimated our monthly meat consumption.
When the first shipment was delivered, at the end of August,
it looked as if the entire meat display at Giant Eagle
had been packed into our freezers
in the kitchen and down in the basement.
Wondering if we really had enough freezer space for this plan,
I began to feel like the guy in Jesus' parables
who built bigger barns in which to store all his grain.

Now, at the end of September,
we've hardly made a dent in our stores.
The first delivery was more than enough for September,
and will probably last through most of October.
The good news is that the plan is flexible;
we don't have to schedule the next shipment until we need it.
At this rate, I think we'll be having fresh, organic, vacuum packed meat
delivered to our house for the next 2 years at least;
and it looks like we'll save some money on the grocery bills.

I have to admit, though,
that whenever I go into the freezer
I think about the issues of the unequal distribution of food
around our globe.
To see all the meat we will eat for the next several months
packed into one place,
reminds me that I'm richer than I think.

When we buy it weekly at the grocery store,
and consume it, along with the leftovers, within the week,
we don't get a visual picture of just how much we eat.
By global standards we are extremely wealthy,
like the Rich Man in Jesus parable
...who feasted sumptuously every day.

* * * * *

We know the Rich Man is rich
because of his conspicuous consumption:
his dress and his diet
and his house,
which is gated for privacy
and protection from the vagrants and beggars of the city.

Lazarus, on the other hand, is destitute.
He is the only character in any of Jesus' parables
who is given a name.
It is derived from the name Eleazar, which means "God helps."
But no person helps Lazarus in this life:
he is penniless, a cripple, and covered with oozing sores.
The only attention he receives is from the dogs in the street
who lick his sores while they compete with him
for the scraps of bread thrown into the street
from the Rich Man's table.

You see, at a feast in those days,
bread was used to wipe the grease from the feaster's hands
and then it was thrown under the table.

And so it came to pass that the Rich Man and the Poor Man both die.

In Lazarus' case, the imagination doesn't present a pretty picture.
Did he starve to death?
Did he contract some disease from the dogs,
or from the filth of the street?
Or did the dogs get tires of waiting for the scraps...?

As for the Rich Man, we must also guess the cause of death...
Hardening of the arteries, perhaps?
Choked on a chicken bone?
Or did he just die comfortably one night in his old age?ⁱ

Whatever the cause, both men die,

and in the afterlife
they find their fortunes drastically reversed.
Lazarus finds himself comforted in the bosom of Abraham,
the place of greatest happiness for a Jew.
But the man who was formerly rich
finds himself tormented in the flames of Hades,
where the dead await the final judgment.

* * * * *

It is a disturbing parable
because there is actually no suggestion that the Rich Man
either persecutes or oppresses Lazarus
in any way.
In fact, there is no direct interaction between the two men at all.
Which is the point, I think.

The Rich Man may even be a believer
in the Gospel of Prosperity,
seeing his material luxury as a sign of God's blessing
for living a respectable life.
He may even hold prayer meetings in his mansion.
If he sins against Lazarus, it is a *sin of omission* (rather than commission)
in that he fails to notice Lazarus sitting at his gate.ⁱⁱ

Or perhaps he has seen Lazarus,
but has contented himself with the rationale
that helping Lazarus is just putting a band-aid on a larger problem,
a problem for which there is no workable solution.

How easy it is for good people, even compassionate people,
to become paralyzed by the complexity of the world's
social and economic problems!

We know that unless *the system* changes somehow,
what little benevolence we might offer
will be swallowed up.

Even if we give up everything we have
and become destitute like Lazarus,
we will not be able to fix the problem of poverty.

And perhaps the greatest suffering for a wealthy Westerner,
is to care deeply about a problem
which he or she cannot fix.

We go further to justify our inaction

by pointing out the poor
(usually hypothetical people that we don't actually know)
who have become poor because they've made
poor moral choices:

they're hooked on illegal drugs or alcohol;
they've gambled their savings away;
they have no work ethic,
and have failed to take advantage
of the opportunities offered to them;
they feel entitled to help they haven't earned.

Now it is true that many who are poor because they have
chosen badly,
but to project this onto all who are poor
is patently unfair.

And so turning poverty into a moral failure on the part of the poor,
we glibly carry on in our love affair
with consumption.

But the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus
turns this kind of thinking on its head.

* * * * *

And so the man who was formerly rich
pleads for Lazarus to be sent to cool his tongue,
but he is told by Abraham that this is not going to happen.

Then, in a sudden commendable concern for others,
he begs to have Lazarus sent to warn his living brothers
so that they may not come to this place of torment.

Even in his concern for his brothers,
he sees Lazarus as one who should serve him.

But even here,
Abraham says,
in the words of Clarence Jordan,
in the old Southern Cotton Patch Gospel,
"Lazarus ain't gon' run no mo' yo' errands, rich man."

Besides, says Abraham,
you and your brothers ought to know better anyway:
What more can be said about how to treat the poor
than was said by Moses and the Prophets?
If they don't listen to them,

they won't listen even if someone rises from the dead.

* * * * *

At this point, it is as if we are just waking from a horrible nightmare
that was ending badly,
and with a rush of relief,
we realized that we are not the Rich Man,
but we are his brothers and sisters,
which means
We still have time to learn from this frightening story.

But can we hear it? Will we hear it?

Poet James K. Baxter tries to help us hear the parable
with this retelling, entitled Ballad of Dives and Lazarus
(Dives comes from the Latin word for "Rich":

Two men lived in the same street
But they were poles apart
For Lazarus had crippled bones
But Dives a crippled heart
That made him stare both night and day
At a production chart.

The springtime came, the springtime went,
The tide flowed up the sand;
Lazarus murmured to himself,
'It is a pleasant land;
The sun that shines upon my coat
Is the comfort of God's hand.'

But Dives in anger cried aloud,
'I spend too much on you!
A blind man cannot watch the dials
That help my engines go;
A deaf man cannot hear the whistle
To tell the end of smoko;

'A lame man cannot fetch and carry
The cheques that I must write –
The graph of my production chart
Is lovely in my sight
As Jacob's ladder was to him
Upon a starry night.

'And you will live, since live you must,
But at a cheaper rate;
A cripple cannot ask the World
To carry his dead weight –
My engines run too slowly
Because of the Welfare State.'

God spoke to Dives upon the hour
(Since God and God alone
Knows what can turn a human heart
Into a heart of stone) –
'My poor blind crippled son,' He said
'Sit here beneath My Throne,

'Why force My Hand? I did not make
Man for the gap of Hell;
I gave the wild sea and the wind
And limbs that serve him well,
And a heart that is My dwelling place
Where none may buy or sell.

'Go back and learn from Lazarus
To walk on My highway
Until your crippled soul can stand
And bear the light of day,
And you and Lazarus are one
In holy poverty.'

...and you and Lazarus are one...in holy poverty.

Lila Watson, an Australian Aborigine Woman, asserted the same
when she said

"If you have come here to help me, then you are wasting your time...
But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine,
then let us work together."

Jesus sees humanity not you and me, but as 'us.'
– and our freedom, our wealth, our lives
are all bound up together.

But to step out of our comfort zone
and engage people from a totally other

social and economic stratum,
can be awkward and uncomfortable.
To really get to know Lazarus,
and to clean his sores is an messy sort of business.
But it seems that 's what Jesus is calling us to do.

There is a poverty ministry in Durham, NC, called Urban Hope
that seems to get the point:
They describe their mission as one of "intentional awkwardness...
"where white and black work together
where privileged and poor share meals." iii

Jesus' ethic of compassion is echoed in Paul's letter to Timothy
which we have read today:
After warning against the "love of money" as the "root of all evil"
Paul's counsels,

*As for those who in the present age are rich,
command them not to be haughty,
or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches,
but rather on God
who richly provides us with everything
for our enjoyment.*

*They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous,
and ready to share,
thus storing up for themselves
the treasure of a good foundation for the future,
so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.*

The message of the gospel is clear on this point:
Life is not to be found in accumulating, hoarding, consuming.
Life is to be found by embracing our brothers and sisters in Christ,
by loving our neighbors,
offering hospitality to strangers,
even in doing good to the enemy.

It can be awkward – but it is a holy awkwardness to which Jesus calls us.

In November, GPC's Outreach Ministry
will lead an Adult Mission Weekend in Pittsburgh.
You should be hearing details soon.

The event will involve serving a meal on Friday night,
staying overnight downtown
and working with Habitat for Humanity on Saturday morning.

We're not going to solve the world's problems on a weekend like this.

But we will take a step out of our comfort zone
and into the reality of poverty and homelessness in today's world.
Work trips like this are a way of taking a step closer to Lazarus;
they are an attempt to see more than we can see
from inside our gated dwellings,
from behind our colored windows.
They are a kind of effort to walk God's highway
toward solidarity with the poor,
until we see that in God's kingdom
our life *IS* bound up
with the life of all God's beloved creatures.

The calling will not get any clearer than it already is.
We already have Moses. And the Prophets.
And we have the Apostle Paul.
But most of all, we have Jesus
who has been raised from the dead
to reveal to us the compassionate heart of God.

That should be more than enough to get our attention.

ⁱ This section indebted to R. Alan Culpepper in *The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol IX* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), p. 314-320.

ⁱⁱ Gerard W. Hughes, *God of Compassion* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1998), pp. 79-80.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.urbanhope.us/2008/>