

Retribution is Mine??

Union Congregational UCC, Green Bay, WI

Luke 16:19-31

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Ouch! No doubt about it. Jesus taught this parable as a means to challenge us – not just the disciples. The tone of this story quashes any Kumbaya moments we may have expected. Many of us may question how Jesus could utter such harsh words.

In this season of stewardship, you may reluctantly hear the message, “Pay up or expect a hot future ahead with extreme water rationing.” That bleak forecast would hardly generate any sense of generosity. Or fear of its prediction may have you adding lots of zeroes on your pledge card. OR you may wonder if there may be more to be learned from the text. I invite you to ponder with me.

It starts out pleasantly enough, describing the everyday activities of a rich man...dressed in finery and munching on whatever his heart desired. But very soon we hear of the beggar just outside his gated house. The beggar hoped for any morsels left after even the dogs had their fill. Unhoused (a modern-day term), Lazarus barely clung to life; sores claimed most of his body. The dogs licked his wounds either as a sign of desperate circumstances, or perhaps canine mercy for Lazarus.

Soon, both men die. The rich man has a funeral, most likely lavish in death as he had been in life. Not so, Lazarus. Few destitute could afford burial, let alone a funeral. We read that angels lifted him to the heavens to be with Abraham.

The story then reveals reversals of fortune. The rich man, captain of his own universe, no longer controls his personal kingdom. He peers upward to see Lazarus sitting with Abraham. For Jews at this time, the scene depicts a spiritual rescue for Lazarus. In later Christian terms, it would be akin to Jesus sitting at the right hand of God.

Incredulously, the rich man orders Lazarus to give him a drop of water to soothe his parched mouth. He continues to command his personal empire much as he had done in life. He may not have had any contact with Lazarus in life, perhaps never noticed him at all. But he commanded those in his household for any whim. Now he needs Lazarus' help, so the orders flow forth.

Abraham intercedes reminding the rich man that he amassed fortunes in his life on earth, while poverty haunted Lazarus. “Lazarus already suffered as you will for eternity. Do not bother us because neither we nor you can cross this great gulf.” While this scene conjures traditional images of heaven and hell, it might also suggest the huge gulf that separates the poor and wealthy in our society.

The rich man slowly comes to understand his fate. Seeing no hope for himself, he pleads for his family. “Would someone from the dead go to my father and brothers to warn them of a similar fate?” He may still be expecting Lazarus to visit this family paving the way for their eternal bliss.

We can almost hear Abraham scolding the rich man. “Tsk, tsk. Why would they listen to yet another voice when the prophets have already spoken?” The Torah had been available to all Jewish people as it is now, if one only “has ears to hear.”

If this story scares you, just about everyone in the sanctuary shares your apprehensions. This scripture certainly does not sound like the Jesus we know. It’s unclear if the gospel writer describes Jesus’ own words or calls upon customs of the times. Scholars may argue both ways. Yet it remains in the Bible for good reason. It teaches us about poverty, separating ourselves from others, the role of money in our lives and our own agency to make a better world.

Just as we do now, the Roman world had differing views on wealth and poverty. People equated wealth with virtue. Because “good people” worked hard and lived right; they were smart, industrious and straight shooters. Of course, they should expect to be rewarded with substantial means. They deserve their wealth. In the ancient world, wealth, virtue, and masculinity usually went hand in hand.

Are we any different today? When we watch television, most shows depict beautiful people in very modern, well-decorated homes. We have a president that promises to make the country wealthy. Plenty of commercials promise to protect our assets, even guiding us to greater wealth. Closer to home, we recognize that people with substantial earnings also put in much time preparing for their chosen fields, dedicated themselves to their work, accepting challenges along the way to rise through their organizations: smart, industrious and straight shooters – just as in Roman times. We look upon those with wealth as mostly deserving the benefits of their hard work.

We also applaud those who give back to their communities. Many of the wealthy lead efforts to improve their communities for the betterment of all. Some form foundations supporting specific needs; others donate to local schools or universities to provide resources to people who could otherwise not afford to enrich their lives.

No so for the rich man in this story. The rich man may never have noticed Lazarus in life. His gate or front door was always locked to the less fortunate. Often, wealthier Romans would place a bench outside their homes as a place for the poor to sit in full view of passersby, available to the mercy of others. It was a status symbol of sorts that proved the wealthy resident cared for those living in the streets. In this story, the rich man wanted to appear generous, but felt no responsibility for anyone outside of his household.

Our views of the poor may remain similar to those of the ancient Romans. We frequently hear that we will only help the “truly needy,” whatever that means. Not so long ago, politicians cut back benefits from so-called “welfare queens.” Recently, a news anchor suggested we simply kill all the homeless. Later, he admitted to the “callousness” of his remarks, but never retracted them.

We tend to associate poverty with nonwhite ethnicities. By numbers alone, more white people received public benefits than brown or black recipients. Now we’re demanding work requirements in a time of increasing unemployment for all. Rather than looking for social causes of poverty, many simply consider the poor as personally deserving their fate. Poverty is a natural outcome of restricting educational opportunities, curtailing public health funding and limited housing stock in many of our communities.

Abraham pointed out that the rich man enjoyed all these benefits. He certainly lavished resources on family and the household, but never extended that goodwill beyond the gate. We need to also consider that justice occurs in our present day lives, not in the great beyond. Some feel that “they’ll get theirs” someday as divine retribution, but ignore present day injustices. This attitude pervaded Jesus’ time and unfortunately, our own too.

We’ve been talking about wealth only in terms of finances. It may be a good time to consider all the ways that we may be rich. Angela Dienhart Hancock, a professor at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, asks us to consider the many ways we may be wealthy. She suggests “Perhaps we are rich in intellect, rich in talent, rich in friendship, rich in health, rich in beauty, rich in circumstance, even rich in the gifts of the Spirit.” The parable invites us to consider not whether we are materially wealthy but take inventory of the kind(s) of wealth we enjoy, and who the corresponding Lazari in our lives might be.” We may not be called to empty our savings accounts, but to extend friendship with the lonely, encouragement for those battling illness or disfigurement or simple presence for those without hope. Our personal riches may be exactly what someone needs in a time of challenge.

In my social work life, I dealt with poverty-facing clients in Manitowoc County. The Social Services Department always had relief funds, so no one would starve on our streets. But I met people poor in other ways. I was assigned to work with Karl, an older man, living alone in a boarding house room, paid for by the county. He had little to keep him occupied and certainly no funds for replenishing his wardrobe. In fact, there was no extra money for anything. He largely suffered from lack of social contacts and quite honestly, boredom. He usually stayed in his room, occasionally reported to Job Service. The poor simply have far fewer options than the rest of us.

Fresh out of college, I suggested he visit the library – one of my personal favorites. I’ve always considered libraries a community gem – a free resource with vast resources. Perhaps that would alleviate long days in the boarding house room. But poverty can affect us in many ways: Karl did not spend his days reading books or magazines. He may not have

been able to read. He may have felt out of place at the library – perhaps surrounded by high-energy school kids or book clubs for more well-to-do patrons. In today’s environment, it might have been somewhat dangerous if he had unpleasant encounters with some who use the library as a warming house.

I doubt I achieved any headway with Karl from a social work plan. Perhaps our visits were not successful in measurable progress, but they did provide affirmation. During our periodic visits, I recognized him as someone worthy of attention. Perhaps he felt some relief from a difficult life, even if it lasted a short while.

I had another elderly client whose wife was very ill; we supplied home services to help them remain in their trailer home. I think our conversations alone buoyed his ability to bear the hardships of caring for another by himself.

In today’s world, we may meet the poor as their literacy tutors. Sometimes we help them prepare for the U.S. citizenship exam. We may spend the night at St. John’s providing a safe place for them to rest. Our Souper Cooks provide a community favorite every month at the NEW Community Shelter: mac and cheese, salad and cake for dessert. We may simply welcome a foreigner by assuring them we’re glad they’re here. It takes courage to provide help and courage to accept it. We accomplish a huge task over the rich man – we see people as people, not closing them out of our lives.

In this season of stewardship, it’s not about just money. It’s about what we do with it. The rich man supported his family but no one else. Abraham did not chastise the rich man for having money. Rather he pointed out the suffering endured by Lazarus and others because he refused to even see them.

While scripture may scare us with images of eternal torment, the real story is simply we have a choice to make our world a better place. Do we look to this story as retribution of the rich man or as a vision of love? Part of making the world a better place is simply noticing others’ needs. We can contribute as much or little as we want, but we must look for the opportunity, not look away. May it be so. Amen.

Resources

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SNAP recipients represent different races and/or ethnicities. White: about 37 percent; African American: 26 percent; Hispanic: 16 percent; Asian: 3 percent; and Native American: about 2 percent. (About 16 percent of participants are categorized as “race unknown.”)

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Mohn, Kendra A., Lead Pastor, Trinity Lutheran Church, Forth Worth, Texas, United States
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