

“What Are We Worth”

Luke 16: 19 – 31

Makemie Presbyterian Church

September 13, 2009 Worship & Picnic Sturgis Park

<sup>19</sup>“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple & fine linen & who feasted sumptuously every day. <sup>20</sup>And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, <sup>21</sup>who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come & lick his sores.

<sup>22</sup>The poor man died & was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died & was buried. <sup>23</sup>In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up & saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. <sup>24</sup>He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water & cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’

<sup>25</sup>But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things & Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here & you are in agony. <sup>26</sup>Besides all this, between you & us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so & no one can cross from there to us.’

<sup>27</sup>He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house—  
<sup>28</sup>for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also  
come into this place of torment.’

<sup>29</sup>Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses & the prophets; they should  
listen to them.’ <sup>30</sup>He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to  
them from the dead, they will repent.’

<sup>31</sup>He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses & the prophets, neither  
will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

What are we worth? What is our true value? Our text this morning is about these two questions.

Now some of you may remember a cartoon from back in the day, “Little Orphan Annie.” It was about a little girl who with her dog Sandy tried to make her way in the world; by pluck, hard work & a cheery disposition. “Gee whiskers” & “Leapin’ lizards” were her watch words. She escapes from a horrible orphanage & is on her own & with no family, no money & no prospects; lost. Along comes Daddy Warbucks who after Annie & maybe Sandy becomes the most important character in the comic strip. The name War-bucks gives us a clue as to how Daddy made his fortune. He earned his money by hard work & he hates snobbery. He’s tough but fair & pays his workers well. His servants love him. Warbucks is bald headed, wears a tuxedo & a diamond stickpin in the middle of a white shirt. Once he takes in Annie she is saved. The theme of this strip is that while Annie is repeatedly separated from Daddy Warbucks, he always rescues her.

Would Daddy Warbucks have like this scripture Ted just read? Or would he have interpreted it as another dig at his hard won fortune. How do we this morning interpret Luke’s parable about Lazarus & the rich man? I’m not sure I like it any more than I like his story about the rich man who spent all

his time building bigger barns for storing his stuff (since the attic of the manse is stuffed with family treasures) or the bit about the camel & the eye of the needle, or those in-your-face woes Luke tacks on to the end of the Beatitudes: “Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.”

As I am sure other people have pointed out to you by now, Jesus said more about wealth than he said about any other moral issue of his day. If we could buy a green letter edition of the Bible, with all of those passages highlighted in U. S. Department of the Treasury green ink, it would be hard for any of us to deny that the gap between rich & poor concerned him more than lying, more than stealing, more than sex—especially in Luke’s gospel, where Jesus confronts the rich four times as often as he does in the other gospels.

Biblical scholars call this evidence of God’s “preferential option for the poor,” which means, roughly, that given a choice between siding with a rich person & siding with a poor person, God is going to choose the poor people every time—not because they are more virtuous, necessarily, but because if God weren’t on their side, no one would be. Goliath would win every time, & the ground would be littered with home-made slingshots. So God stands with the little people, & when the big people come at them, God lets them

know that--sooner or later, in this world or the next—big & little, rich & poor, happy & sad, are going to change places.

If you have gotten this message loud & clear, as I have, then perhaps you might wonder sometimes if rich people are not wasting their time hanging out at church. If God has already decided whom to side with, & if wealth is as much an impediment to heaven as Jesus seemed to think it was, then perhaps it is time for those of us with assets to try scientology, or Hinduism, or good old humanism. Why stay here, where we can count on getting beat up fairly regularly for what we have?

In late January ten years ago , Pope John Paul II met with the Catholic bishops of North & South America in Mexico City, where he surprised none of them by urging them to care for the poor. But he surprised quite a few of them by also calling them to minister to the rich. “Love for the poor must be preferential, but not exclusive,” the Pope said in his apostolic exhortation. “The leading sectors of society have been neglected & many people have thus been estranged from the church.”

While he did not put it this bluntly, he was warning church leaders that if they continue to villainize the rich in their teaching & preaching, they’re going to drive those people out of the church of Christ & into the church of unbridled capitalism, where their wealth & success will receive a much

warmer welcome. In the capitalist church, it is good to be rich. It means you have done something right, not wrong, & there are no regular scoldings about how you should give your money away to people who have not worked anywhere near as hard as you. Success is earned in this value system. It is the reward you get for your brains, your guts, your long hours--or at least that is the myth.

If you have spent any time out of work—either because you don't work, or because you got sick, or old, or had a baby, or because your company was bought by a larger company & you got “downsized”--then you know something else about the church of capitalism, & that's that it really does not care about you unless you can produce. Some people take that into account & buy extra disability insurance, but others are plainly shocked when they are called into the boss' office one day & handed their pink slips. I know one man who was a manufacturer's representative for the same company for twenty-seven years. In 2007, they gave him a gold pin for being sales agent of the year. In 2008, they fired him for failing to meet their new quota.

If you don't have some other value system in place when something like that happens to you, then it can knock you overboard. If you have not learned that you are worth more than your bottom line, more than your

billable hours, more than your individual contribution to the gross national product, then you can find yourself treading some pretty dark waters while you wonder where all your brains & guts & long hours have gotten you.

That's what the Pope was worried about, I think—that if the church does not minister to rich & poor alike, then economic distinctions will divide people in church as much as they divide them everywhere else on earth. The sides will just change places, is all. The poor will be the good guys & the rich will be the bad guys, but money will still be what determines who is who--not God but mammon. Money will still divide the body of Christ.

So, what does all of this have to do with the parable of Lazarus & the rich man? I hope I can say. I have always heard it as one more story about how the poor will be rewarded while the rich will be punished, with Father Abraham standing between them to prevent any blurring of the boundaries at the end. I suppose that is all right as far as it goes, although the parable itself admits that the warning will never work.

When the rich man wants Abraham to send Lazarus with a message to his equally rich brothers—tell them to get shed of that cash now before it is too late—Abraham lets him know that it won't do any good. They have already been told, Abraham says. Moses & the prophets told them & told them, the same way they told you, but people never seem to get the

message. They just keep letting money divide them—the poor outside the gate, the rich inside the gate—and when the division turns out to be permanent, with—whoops, all the heat on the inside—then they wail & moan like no one ever told them so.

We know better. We know money cannot save us, at least not in any ultimate sense, & yet look around. Money remains our favorite way of distinguishing between who is saved in this world & who is lost. Do you live in a nice house with nine rooms, & a stuffed attic? Safe! Or do you live in a trailer park south of town with duct tape over the broken windows? Lost! Do you have a good pension plan, a good health plan, plus an extra IRA to which you make regular contributions? Safe! Or are you fifty years old & still working without benefits, hoping against hope that you never get sick? Lost!

These kinds of judgments come so naturally that few of us ever question them. I don't know anyone who wants to be sick or poor or out of work, but wouldn't it be interesting if we had different criteria? Do you have plenty of time for the people & things that matter most to you? Are you truly free to choose how you spend most of the days of your life? Safe! Or do you work all the time, & even when you are not working, do you worry about not working? Lost!

Are you rich in love? Can you look at almost any human face & see the family resemblance there? Safe! Or do you see mostly strangers, who fall into two basic categories: of use or of no use to you? Lost!

I don't think money was the rich man's problem so much as it was that gate he bought with it. If the gate had just kept Lazarus off his property, that would have been one thing, but it did more than that. It kept Lazarus off his hands as well. It kept Lazarus off his heart & mind, because the rich man made the same mistake most of us do. He believed money really could fix a chasm between the saved & the lost—that once he had enough money to buy a gate, he was safe from all the ugliness on the other side of it—or at least safe as long as he could afford to live there. God forbid that he should ever be like Lazarus. God forbid that he should ever be in such great need that he had to live on someone else's leftovers.

I don't know what Lazarus' part in the great divide was, but I do know people who are on his side of the gate. One of them is a single mother with seven children whose name I got from the Department of Family & Children Services. When I told her the church wanted to sponsor her family for Christmas, she looked at me with a face full of fury. "I need that," she said. "My children need that, so I can't say no. But don't expect me to march down the aisle of your church crying & thank you so that all you big

Christians can feel good about yourselves. I have done that & done that, but I'm not doing it anymore." Then she did start to cry. "I'd like to sit where you sit just one time in my life," she said. "Just one time I'd like to be the one giving instead of the one taking."

Wherever you sit, the story of Lazarus & the rich man suggests that most of us are afraid of the wrong things. We are afraid of what lies on the other side of the gate when the gate itself is really much scarier. It separates us from our kin. It deceives us about who is safe & who is lost. It shuts out those who might bring us cool water. And as Jesus pointed out ahead of time, this warning will do most of us no good whatsoever.

We will continue to view those on the other side of the gate as members of some other species, whom we face across a great chasm of fear, or envy, or just plain incomprehension. We will continue to resent each other for being there, for reminding us of things we would rather not think about, & while we are doing that we will miss a very great truth: namely, that we are all God's beloved. We are all members of the same body. Money can't change that, at least not unless we insist on it. If we insist, then God won't argue. The gate between us will stay closed, even when our lives depend on getting through it.

There is no way to change the ending of this story. The rich man is hot

& Lazarus is not, but I still hear good news in it for everyone involved. God knows the rich can be as imprisoned by their wealth as the poor are by their poverty. There is so much more to any of us than our money. There are so many better ways to measure our worth. If we can open the gates between us while we are still alive, then the message is hard to miss. Our true value lies in Who loves us, & Who keeps hoping against hope that we will learn to love each other too. Amen.