

Message Manuscript for "Being Rich Can Make You Poor" Luke 16:19-31  
Delivered to Church for the Highlands  
Sunday, September 29, 2013

Have you ever been driving down the highway and seen someone who is off on the shoulder of the road, with hood up or with tire jack out? Did the thought roll through your mind that you should stop and help? Or, what about seeing someone walking down the highway with a red plastic gas can? Ever stop and offer assistance? Most of us probably haven't, and that may not be a bad thing. But, did you know that if you see someone in a wreck or in a life-threatening situation and you don't stop to render aid then you can be in some real trouble? Have you heard of the Good Samaritan Law? It is a law that makes it possible for people to rescue other people in need without having to worry about any liability for doing so. Aptly named after Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, it clears all obstacles for people to become heroes and rescuers, giving people in need as much opportunity for help as possible. You might wonder why such a law is in need. Don't people rush to the rescue of another person when they see them in need or hear their cries for help? As much as we would like to think people would do what is right, the reality is that this doesn't always happen. There is a concept in law known as "duty to rescue" that looks out for victims in need and holds responsible any passers by who choose not to help.<sup>1</sup> This is an attempt at helping those in need by reminding people who see their need that they have a moral--and legal--obligation to help.

Our gospel text today, Luke 16:19-31, presents us with a story Jesus told that is lesser known or maybe just seems to be less quoted in our day than the Good Samaritan. It is the story of a rich man and a poor man named Lazarus. It is one Jesus told with powerful contrasts between rich and poor that reminds us of our duty to rescue the Lazarus' of our time just as much as it did to those around Jesus that day.

Imagine being there in the crowd as Jesus told this story. Maybe you've already heard him tell the parables we've been looking at these last several weeks from Luke's gospel. You've heard about a lost sheep, a lost coin, and even a dishonest manager whose last minute act of shrewdness covers his tail. And maybe you were one of those in the crowd that day whose eyes looked away from Jesus as your head and then your feet turned the other direction when he mentioned that no one can serve two masters; that no one can worship both God and money. You started to walk away, but something about the piercing truth of what Jesus was saying

holds you back. Sure enough, Jesus launches into another story, one you find yourself in at various places.

As Jesus tells about the rich man, several things happen on the inside of you. You think of all of the rich people you know or have seen who are like this man. He is not only rich, but filthy rich. He is surrounded by a feast at the table as he sits down to dine, indulging in a meal consisting of items equivalent today to an appetizer of Beluga caviar, a sumptuously thick Kobe steak, enjoyed with a vintage bottle of Chateau Margaux, and plate after plate of sides, more than he could ever begin to eat. He liked to have many choices and to be able to sample some of everything. There is obviously more food at the table than he alone could ever eat. You notice what he's wearing, dressed for dinner in his Dolce and Gabana black pinstripe suit, and White Gold Diamond Rolex watch. This isn't a special occasion for him, just another night of dining at his house.

Then there is the poor man. He has on what he had on yesterday, and the day before that. The holes in his clothes are markers to everyone that he doesn't just have the same color and kind of pants to wear each day. He has only the same clothes to wear every day. He hasn't had a bath in as long as he can remember. The sores on his body make it too uncomfortable to even think of it, even if he did have access to fresh water. His body hurts while his stomach aches, especially after the smell of the rich man's feast wafts down the street and into his nostrils. He follows his nose to where the man is eating, watching where the crumbs are falling to move in for them when the man is done. He knows the rich man sees him there, but the condescending glance of acknowledgement he gives is enough to remind him he won't be sharing any of it with him. His stomach twists and turns with agony, a feeling he has experienced for most of his life. He thought that this man might have mercy, especially since he had more on his table than he could ever eat, with leftovers fed to the dogs and the trash.

The story doesn't end here with the man's agony. Jesus is too good of a story teller for that. While everyone was into one or the other character at this point, Jesus provided a reversal. Both men died, experiencing the only thing they had in common. The poor man was carried off by angels to the bosom of Abraham; to paradise. The rich man died, was buried, and found himself in the torment of Hades. He no longer could quench his thirst with the finest of wine, satisfy his hunger with the best of meat, or clothe his nakedness with the softest of wool. He, used to looking down on others, was now looking up, seeing Lazarus, sitting in the wealth and comfort of Abraham. Seeing Abraham, he cried out for him to have

Lazarus just do the minimum for him, just to have him dip his finger and water and give him a bit of relief. Abraham reminded him that he had had his time of comfort. Lazarus was now the one in comfort. Their places had been reversed, permanently.

The point of Jesus' reversal was to make sure the people in his crowd, rich or just longing to be rich one day, understood that their wealth could actually make them poor. The rich man became poor by doing nothing. He didn't share what God had so graciously provided. He had a duty to rescue Lazarus and he didn't. Now he was the poor one.

What Jesus would have us to hear from this today is the same: being rich can make us poor. The same reversal can happen to us. In fact, it might be happening right now. You and I may just be the rich man at the dining table, having a table of plenty, enough clothes to keep us from being naked, access to enough healthcare to heal any sores that may come on our bodies. Not you? Wait, are you sure you aren't rich?

Not to belittle American poverty, as it is real and continues to be a real problem especially for children in our nation, but we certainly have less extreme poverty when compared with conditions in other nations around the globe. According to UNICEF, nearly half of the world's population — more than 3 billion people — live on less than \$2.50 a day. More than 1.3 billion live in extreme poverty (less than \$1.25 a day).<sup>2</sup> If you have more than that to live on a day, you have more wealth than most of your global neighbors. No matter where you live, if you have a piece of bread and your neighbor has none, then you have something to share.

Seeing that we are rich, in comparison with almost everyone else in the world, what do we do to make sure we don't become poor like the rich man? The first thing we can do is to hear our call from Jesus here to take what we have and help those who don't have. Our minds go right to money on this one, and appropriately so. We need to understand that what God puts into our hands is to be managed well, especially for the benefit of helping people in need. I don't think Jesus was limiting his story to be just about money, though. The rich man had food, time, resources, housing, and influence he could have provided to Lazarus. If we take stock of what we have and what we have to give, we too see that we have a wealth of things to offer the people God puts in our pathway.

So, does this mean the guy under the bridge, by the Taco Bell down at I-49 and King's Highway, with a creative sign stating his homelessness and asking for a

taco, should become our first assignment after hearing this story today? Maybe, but I think there is a better way for us to help him and the Lazarus' here in our community. It's probably ok to buy him a taco, but you can do so and still be doing nothing because you still haven't done anything about the something that could really help him. I am not letting you or me off the hook here, but I am saying we need to work beyond the immediate need to addressing the cause and solution of our brother or sister's poverty. We've already started doing this here at Church for the Highlands, with our shared ministry with area churches with Highland Center Ministries, and with faith groups and institutions in Interfaith. And we must continue, always being sure we are moving beyond our words and ideas to implementing solutions. I believe God has given us the resources, the wisdom, the creative power to bring about solutions for poor people right here in the Highland neighborhood. It is not just some lofty idealism or church chat. I really believe it. Do you? Just look at what we've come up with so far with our financial services ministry. We are still experimenting, tweaking and struggling with this task, but we are making progress. We are actually working with individuals who are in desperate need to find lasting solutions and pathways out of their poverty. You are making solutions to poverty happen when you tutor a child with basic math, read to a child, give an offering, pray for a request, bring someone to church, sort clothing, and when you serve a hot meal on a Thursday night in the gym. It is putting feet to that part of the Lord's Prayer, "on earth as it is in heaven." When we do these things, we are doing something for Lazarus. And for Jesus.

John Chrysostom (theologian and pastor, 4th century) said, "The almsgiver is a harbour for those in necessity: a harbour receives all who have encountered shipwreck, and frees them from danger; whether they are bad or good. ... So you likewise, when you see on earth the man who has encountered the shipwreck of poverty, do not judge him, do not seek an account of his life, but free him from his misfortune."<sup>3</sup> In other words, having something means you have a "duty to rescue." The real sin is not in having but in doing nothing.

<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Duty\\_to\\_rescue](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Duty_to_rescue)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.globalissues.org/article/26/poverty-facts-and-stats>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.preachingtoday.com/search/?type=scripture&query=Luke%2016:19-31>