

The Rich Man and Lazarus. I've heard it a few times this week referred to as one of Jesus' parables. But it doesn't sound like a parable to me. It doesn't have the characteristic twist we find in other parables - no surprises that puzzle or shift our view of the world or God's relationship with it. Instead, it reads to me more like an allegory - a narrative that can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning with moral or political significance. In other words, a story that says more than what the story's about.

Your church council met this week and I wasn't entirely prepared for it. This was the meeting that comes every year exactly one month before I expect it to. With our annual budget meeting slated for October, I figured I had one more month to gear up for an intense meeting on finances and stewardship. But year after year, Christmas comes early, and our September meeting revs the engine of our fall stewardship drive.

So I'd been sitting in front of this story about the rich man and Lazarus, trying to read it as a parable, then as an allegory - trying to read some kind of meaning into it. Then Tuesday night rolled around and I went home with a different question: From "what can I say about this story," I started asking, "what is this story saying to us now?"

The good news is here. Jesus is here, and he's got good news for us. God in Christ took flesh, but God in Christ also takes flesh - in the reading of scripture and in the material of our lives, God in Christ shows up. In other words, Jesus puts on the garments of our lives - what we're doing, what we're going through, all of our questions, concerns, distractions, addictions, fears and joys and failures. Christ shows up in flesh.

So, as we step together into this season of stewardship, what does The Rich Man and Lazarus have to tell us. What is the good news that Jesus is giving us today, in this flesh?

Whenever there is talk about money, fear is never far behind. Amen?

As the life-blood of society, of commerce, and the capitalist system in which we live (that orders our lives), money is infused into every aspect of the world as we know it. Yes, even church! Quite simply, money has value. But because it's so ubiquitous, that value is inflated: It becomes not only our barometer for "worth" and "worthiness" (depending on how much we have) but can actually cloud our eyes, hold our attention, and literally consume us. We see this clearly reflected in the Rich Man, who feasts sumptuously every day in fine linen and colors reserved for Roman royalty. His attention doesn't go far beyond the sources of his pleasure - his home, his clothes, his meals, his property. In fact, his attention stops at the gate.

But the attention of the story starts at the gate. Though he is described in as much detail as the Rich Man, only one of these men has a name: **Lazarus**. And in complete contrast to the Rich Man, Lazarus is in deep need. In response to scripture, formed in worship, and attentive to Jesus, the church attends (literally gives its attention) to those in need. We **pay** attention to Lazarus, and seek to serve "Lazarus" in our world, wherever he is found. And in this world, paying attention and serving needs require money.

To see the fear that conversations about stewardship and money stir in us, we need to look at the story allegorically.

The scene is set in the first two verses, and these two men (with their respective circumstances) come to reflect our fears around money. Any “ask” for financial giving and generosity puts us in a bind: We are afraid of either being too much like the “Rich Man” - stingy, ungenerous, and blind to the need before us - or (out of that fear) giving too much, hobbling our financial health, and winding up like “Lazarus.” We want to be wise and generous in our stewardship, but fear that we are neither. In this way, the fears each of these men represent in our 21st century relationship to money live together in us all.

As the story continues, both men die - Lazarus goes to Abraham, and the Rich Man goes to Hades. The circumstances of the two men in death are opposite of what they were in life. Here the true poverty of the Rich Man is revealed. He cries out for relief. The gate he never crossed in life is the only thing keeping him from that relief, but it has become a chasm. Abraham describes the great reversal of fortune and points out the chasm - fixed and unpassable. The Rich Man demonstrates its impassibility by only ever speaking to Abraham, never addressing Lazarus whom he wants sent: The Rich Man’s attention cannot scale what separates the two men - the gate in life, and the chasm in death.

To Abraham he says, “Send Lazarus to my five brothers to warn them.” Apparently they are living the same sequestered, lavish life he did. Abraham tells him that they have Moses and they have the prophets to show them how they ought to live. “But if someone [i.e. Lazarus] goes to them from the dead, they will repent,” says the man. But Abraham says, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”

In our measured, fear-based relationship with money, in all the blindness money creates in this world, we can find ourselves lost in that chasm - caught between these dueling fears and the threat of these dueling conditions. No bearing on which side we might be on, whether foolishly generous, utterly consumed, or lost somewhere in the middle, the chasm is vast and impassable.

The chasm between the living and the dead, the chasm between the bosom of Abraham and Hades, only one person has crossed. Living, we are on one side of that chasm in a world of our making in which decisions around giving and the possible consequences (in both life and death) scare us. But it is into this world that Jesus came. It is into this world that Jesus crossed the chasm and rose from the dead. It is in this world, this life, this money-focused existence that Jesus comes to you, seeks you out, steadying your sight, and speaks into that chasm, "Peace be with you."

Money would not have saved Lazarus, and money did not save the Rich Man. But in Christ, that gate swings open. In Christ, the chasm is crossed and these men meet. Lazarus is fed and healed. But so too is the rich man - fed and healed.

Money is a tool we seek to put to use in service of the gospel. In this work, we hear Jesus tell us, be not afraid. For in Christ we are free of fear. And full of confidence that the need of our church and the need of Lazarus (wherever he may be found), will be heard, we give - not out of fear, but in joy and gratitude. For we know that (mysteriously) **in giving, we receive** - healing, food at the table, entrance and welcome to the kingdom of God, unity in spirit, in God, in mission. These are the fruits of our giving. Finding ourselves gratefully and fully cared for, we are freed to turn to places and people in need and **give our very selves**. So we take hold of this gift - the life that really is life.

AMEN