

All around us, all the time, are issues with money, and we need to make decisions and set priorities about money. It seems to me that most elections are full of monetary issues... How much are politicians spending on ads, can you win an election if you have the most money, and how much of our hard earned money will go to taxes... what part of the state and federal budget do I agree with? And speaking of budgets, many people of faith like to remind us that, even at the personal level, our budgets or checkbooks give a clear picture of what are our values and our priorities!

The Bible is no different; in both Jewish and Christian testaments, issues of wealth and poverty, haves and have nots, are spoken of often. We consider Moses' rule of the tithe, and ponder if we will give even 5% to charities. Jesus often tells stories about some "rich man" as in this morning's gospel reading. One of the most famous sayings is that it is harder for a "rich man" to enter the kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. Note he does not say it is prohibitive, but just difficult for a rich man. And before we go any further, let's be clear that most of us here, in comparison to the world, are in the category of being rich just by virtue of having decent homes, clothing, education, transportation, etc. In the Bible, there are many cautions about money, and the apostle Paul is very hard-hitting; in his words to his disciple Timothy, we hear that the "love of money is the root of all kinds of evil," and people who "want to be rich may be tempted and trapped by senseless and harmful desires that plunge them into ruin and destruction." Whoah! What does he mean by harmful desires, ruin and destruction?

There are plenty of examples in the news and all around us... people who seek control, using money as power to control others, thereby destroying relationships. Corporations often put profit over people, valuing the bottom line and wealth of CEO's over the lives of

the employees. We could go on and on with examples of people who get rich or stay rich at the expense of common folks or slaves. We could talk about the profits of large corporations at the expense of clean air or clean water. We know of countless examples of very rich men who use their wealth and power to abuse others, especially women. Yes, “senseless and harmful desires” can come with money, as Paul says.

In Jesus’ story, yes, a hard story to read, there are no reasons given for why the “rich man” was in Hades or Hell, in a place of torment. But I think we can read between the lines and get the implication from Jesus that his fine clothes and sumptuous feasting were somehow connected to his neglect of the poor man Lazarus lying outside his gate. His focus on excesses for himself naturally implied the neglect of others. (Of course this is not true for all with wealth! My clergy group spent quite awhile this week talking about Queen Elizabeth, and how philanthropic and warm-hearted she was in her dealings with the “common folk.”)

In Jesus’ story, neglect of the poor led the rich man to a place of torment. And the story is so hard-hitting that Jesus had Abraham say to the rich man that there is no chance for him, that there is a great “chasm fixed” between him and the angels and Lazarus. I would want to argue with Jesus, or with the translation; I’d say to Jesus: “Hey, what about second chances, what about Peter saying that you preached even to souls in hell; surely all are capable of a change of heart, of repentance! This rich man was begging for a little water for his dry tongue. Surely there is mercy for neglecting or avoiding a beggar. Yes, Jesus uses strong language in stories to make a point. I often call it rhetorical device, or rhetorical excess, to make a point. And I think Jesus’ point about the chasm between the rich man’s place of torment and Lazarus’ comfort with angels is that once we are entrenched in our ways, it is nearly impossible to change course.

Jesus tells the rich man that if his five brothers did not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither would they listen to a risen Lazarus. They just don't listen to cries of the poor and sick, for they are too focused on increasing their own wealth and pleasures.

I'd like to highlight one part of Jesus' story that struck me this week. Poor wounded Lazarus was "lying at the gate" of the rich man. It made me think of large estates encircled by gates, and of whole communities circled by gates! There is something about gates that can speak volumes. Sure, there are necessary boundaries, but there is also the message of keeping people out, keeping out the riff raff, and most likely not really seeing them! Lazarus and his plight were not seen by the rich man and his staff. Only the dogs paid attention and licked his wounds. Jesus also paid attention to Lazarus; note that Lazarus is important enough as a person to give him a name, whereas the "rich man" remains nameless, just a teaching tool in the story. Scholars have often said that in the Bible, God has a "preferential option for the poor." (Beatitudes: "Blessed are the poor, for they shall inherit")

I am reminded of a good book on Christian Mission, entitled "Christ Outside the Gate." The title comes from the end of the letter to the Hebrews, which says: *For the bodies of those animals whose blood is a sacrifice for sin are burned outside of the camp. So Jesus also suffered "outside the gate" in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go forth to him outside the camp, and bear the abuse he endured ... Do not neglect to do good and share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.* The clear meaning is that Christ is often found "outside the gate" in the places of poverty, sickness and suffering. We remember his words in Matthew 25, "Even when you (visited or fed or clothed) the *least* of these, you were (doing so) unto me."

Like the rich man in the story, we are all in a balancing act of deciding how much we need to live on, what kind of lifestyle we want or need, and what part of our resources we can give away ... to those outside of our gates, hoping for leftovers from our tables. We know that the rich man in the story did not truly see or hear poor Lazarus. I think that is Jesus' call to us: Will we see Lazarus? Will we hear him? It just so happens that there is a great song (yes, by Ken Medema) to encourage us to see neighbors "face to face." "It just might make the world a better place, if we can see each other face to face!"

"Can you see me in your city slowly walking down the crowded street? Ragged clothing around this body, worn out shoes round these weary feet? And can you see me when the night falls? I am looking everywhere just to find a place to sleep. Can you see me when the dawn breaks? No place to go right now, no schedules to keep.

REFRAIN: I am waving to you now. Can you see me? I am calling out to you. Can you hear me? I am reaching for you now. Can you find me? The world just might become a better place, if we could see each other face to face.

In my village when the night comes, children huddle against the chilling night. Babies whimper, mamas hush them: sleep now my hungry child, until the morning light. And in my village, when the dawn breaks, fields lie barren, and no rain clouds cross the sky. Who will show us something better? Who will stand beside us now and put new hope in our eyes? REFRAIN.

Not just outside our gates, not just in far away villages, but all around us, all the time, are people who need help and compassion. The more we see each other face to face, hear each other, the more we will extend compassionate love (and monetary aid when helpful.) Amen.

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