

## Snake Handling

A Sermon for the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 26<sup>th</sup>, 2010

1 Timothy 6:6-19; Psalm 146; Luke 16:19-31

In the fifty-eighth chapter of Isaiah, the prophet writes, “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.”

By this time in the church year, many of you will recognize that the writer of the Gospel of Luke has been preaching a rather long, drawn-out, sermon series on the topics of wealth and poverty in Jesus’ ministry. Most of us, I suppose, have had just about enough of it. Not yet, says Luke, not before you hear the story of the rich man and Lazarus, not before you hear my good news for the rich. Well, it’s just about time for a good word for the rich, don’t you think? Lord knows, there has been plenty of good news along the way for the poor.

Almost a year ago in Advent Jesus’ mother Mary sang about how “the Mighty One . . . has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” I almost choke on the words about the rich being sent away empty whenever we sing them during the Evening Prayer. But this is good news for the poor.

During the season of Lent, we heard again about the prodigal son who squanders his dad’s fortune while tossing his soul into “riotous living” just before descending to eat with the pigs. The dead son returns to his father to be received with open arms and a party the likes of which no one in the neighborhood has ever seen. More good news for the poor.

About the middle of the Pentecost season, while some of us were sweltering through the August heat and humidity (it began to feel like Hades in here), we heard Luke telling about the rich fool who decided to build bigger, better barns only to wind up with a fatal stroke on the night before those bigger, better barns were built. Bad news for the rich.

Finally, just last Sunday, Jesus wound up and threw a hardball, concluding that “You cannot serve God and wealth.” More bad news for the rich.

If the writer of this Gospel were to ask you to give this long, drawn-out sermon series a title, you might decide to call it something like, “Let’s Get the Rich,” or “The Root of All Evil,” or, if you’re a child of the sixties, “The Good, the Bad, and the Wealthy,” or, if you’re a child of more recent times, “Who would ever Want to Be a Millionaire?”

But not me. Considering all that we have heard, I don’t think Jesus is out to get the wealthy, just because you happen to be wealthy, which includes all of us here this morning when placed beside the majority of people on this planet barely breathing today. According to the World Bank, about half of the people in the world live on just *two dollars* a day which is less than what I spend on Starbucks or Dunkin Donuts per day. More than a billion people live on *one dollar* a day, suffering miserably from the consequences of poverty, lacking water, food, the necessities of life. So, what I’d like to know this morning is this, does Jesus have a gospel for the wealthy?

When you consider all the searching and seeking for the lost in the chapter preceding this one, including the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son, it just doesn’t seem very likely to me that now all of a sudden nobody can find the lost rich man. Surely the gospel of Jesus also seeks the wealthy. Don’t forget that they called Jesus “a glutton and a drunkard” who ate with sinners and tax collectors. Those tax collectors like Zacchaeus often had lots of money at the expense of their own people. The centurion who begs Jesus to heal his slave was surely a man of means. The Pharisees whom Jesus calls “lovers of

money” were always of concern to him, otherwise he would never have argued so fiercely with them. Luke seems to say that there are many different ways that we can become lost like the sheep, the coin, and the son.

One of those ways to get lost, say the Scriptures, is through wealth. Hear again today Paul’s words to Timothy, “. . . in their eagerness to be rich some have *wandered away* (like lost sheep?), they have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.” Take a look at the way people work themselves literally to death these days, sacrificing themselves, their health, their families, their spouses, their friends, their very lives before the god of riches—“mammon” as we learned last Sunday—all in an effort to “get ahead,” “piercing themselves with many pains.”

Writing in the second century, Clement of Alexandria compared wealth to the danger of handling a poisonous snake which “will twist round the hand and bite, unless one knows how to lay hold of it without danger by the point of the tail. And riches, wriggling either in an experienced or inexperienced grasp, are dexterous at adhering and biting; unless one, despising them, use them skillfully, so as to crush the creature by the charm of the Word, and himself escape unscathed.”

Listen to the ongoing concern of Jesus, the gospel writers, the apostles, the early church fathers for the poisonous nature of material possessions and the perils of an uncaring attitude toward those in need. When the Apostle Paul sought the official approval of the Christian leaders in Jerusalem, he says that “the only thing they asked us to do was to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.” He goes on to counsel his listeners to develop contentment, and his definition of contentment is this: “if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.”

Just as he did last Sunday, Jesus again opens our story today with the phrase, “There was a rich man . . . And at his gate lay a poor man . . .” Now, the rich man, being the rugged individualist that he is, “dresses himself,” he “does for himself,” without help from anyone else. The man dresses himself, not just on Sundays, but every single day, in the most expensive clothes he can find, including that high quality Egyptian cotton used to make his expensive Calvin Klein underwear (ahem, linen). Nothing but the best for our man, feasting everyday at a bounteous table of sumptuous food, the sort I imagine that you would find on a Royal Caribbean cruise-liner, a far cry from Paul’s “if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.” Nothing about this man even hints of need.

Yes, “there was a rich man . . . And at his gate lay a poor man . . .”

Note that among all the parables which Jesus told, this poor man, lying at the gate of this rich man, is the *only character* in a parable who is ever given a name. This is significant I think. His name is “Lazarus,” from the name “Eliezer,” from the Hebrew verb “ezer,” which means “to help.” Ironically, Jesus has named this poor man, “Lazarus,” meaning “one whom God helps.”

Another early church father said that God has a “peculiar respect” for the lowly, and that caring for the poor was the “distinctive sign” by which believers were known. Knowing God, he said, means caring for the people close to God’s heart.”

“Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,” prays the psalmist, “whose hope is in the Lord their God. . . who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow. . . .”

Moses specifically required that the harvest be shared with the poor and transient: “You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in the land.” And the prophets offered no release from the law.

Lazarus is one whom God helps, one who is close to the heart of God. But like the prodigal son, who wallows with the pigs, Lazarus lies with the dogs, and no one gave Lazarus anything, not even the scraps from the rich man’s dumpster, not even a glance from his veranda. The rich man would not even look at Lazarus. The only help that Lazarus receives at the rich man’s gate is from a pack of dogs that do

him the favor of cleansing his wounds with their spittle. He isn't even given a descent burial but depends upon the angels to carry him to Father Abraham's lap. There is not one person to carry away his dead body.

Father Abraham is right, in life and in death, there is a great chasm: "Child . . . Child," he says to the rich man, "remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed . . ."

Who fixed that great chasm? I'd like to know. Well, listen to this. Even now, in what is the most appalling offense of the entire parable, the rich man continues to ignore Lazarus, speaking instead to Father Abraham, appealing to him twice so that Abraham might send Lazarus to be his lackey. "Send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue. . . Send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment."

"Send Lazarus . . ." Even now, tormented in Hades, a wide chasm is fixed, with his pompous air of command, the rich man's heart is so hardened, so dark, that he still cannot recognize Lazarus as being fully human, even as Father Abraham addresses the rich man himself as "Child" and nestles Lazarus next to him.

Now, do you see? Do you see who is really, really lost?

"But I'm not lost, not even in Hades," the rich man seems to protest, "I'm in charge, so send Lazarus!"

In the end, the contrasts of wealth and poverty are not the real issues of Luke's sermon series. Remember that Father Abraham himself was a very wealthy man who now takes a very poor man into his embrace. Abraham becomes an example to all of us who are rich.

"Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am."

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The parables we have heard as well as this story cut much deeper beyond wealth into the attitude, the personality, the lost soul of the rich who need to be raised from the dead. The snake has bitten the hand of this rich man, deadening his compassion with its venom. He simply cannot relate to Lazarus as a fellow child of God.

Could it be that not having compassion is a sure sign of being lost? Might Jesus be warning us that the fangs of riches can poison our compassion by deadening us to the need of others? As we have so often heard, to love God is to love the neighbor in need. The Scriptures tell us. Jesus tells us.

Maybe the rich man's torment is the loss of human compassion, a loss he has lived with all of his life, now made painfully manifest in Hades. If we cannot feel compassion for others, then we have lost the greatest if not the only law of human existence. In time, the wealth that has numbed us to the need of our neighbor-in-need deceives us into imagining that we ourselves have no need, that are sufficient unto ourselves, that can easily substitute hard work and a little luck for God's grace and mercy.

When this happens, we are truly lost.

In the end, the rich man is revealed as the one who is lost, almost beyond the reach of God's grace it seems, "all curved in on himself," as Luther defines sin, "piercing himself with many pains," as this letter to Timothy says.

"Then Jesus said to Zacchaeus, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.'"

This is the gospel to the rich. Praise be to Christ.

“As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.”