

The Good News of the gospel of God's love doesn't always strike us as good news, especially not at first and especially when we want to resist what God is needing for us to hear. It's true both in the financial and in the spiritual realms: whether or not it sounds like good news depends on where we sit. What comes as good news in Darfur where a square meal is a luxury may not sound the same to those whose biggest challenge is how to manage their assets. What comes as good news to those who've experienced the full folly of living their own way for their own sake in this world and at that point offered what's left of their life and will over to the living God for redemption does not sound like good news, at first, to those who are intent on remaining "in control" over their lives and everything they possess, confident they will manage it all very nicely.

Where do you sit this morning as you hear this simple parable from Jesus? How do you hear it, interpret it?

(There are inaccurate ways to interpret it. Children and Marxists may hear this parable and be glad because it sounds as if everything turns out fair in the end: the rich "bad guys" get their comeuppance and the poor "good guys" enjoy the happy ending. But of course the main point is not simply that people with a lot of money are the bad guys, "boo," and poor people are the good guys, "yay!" (If only the spiritual life were so easy: get rid of our money and live happily ever after!)

[Many Christians have been conditioned to hear a permanent, eternally impassable gulf fixed between "heaven" and "hell" from this parable, but I do not read of this great gulf between the rich man and the poor man as enduring eternally. Impassable at the time Jesus tells the story, at the time Lazarus and the rich man have arrived in Hades, in this "great beyond"—but the parable is not about the passing of time in Hades. (And some literalists would be embarrassed that this poor man arrives in "heaven" without ever having known any relationship with Jesus in this lifetime. Of course there is no hope in our crossing the great chasm apart from the mercy of Christ—who happens to be absent within the parable. Our eternal hope has never rested in Abraham, but rather in "the God who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead."]

How do you interpret this parable?

The strategy is never to try merely to total up and allegorize all the various details. The point of understanding is to find the one key which makes sense of all these details. And this will require of us a dispassionate analysis. I'll never get to the bottom of this parable, if I'm telling God, for instance, "Surely I couldn't be this wealthy man in the story, You must mean someone else, someone super-wealthy?" "You couldn't mean that how we treat the poor is really all that important?"

Whatever the details, I will never understand a parable if I can only hear it thru my own prior filters. The reason Jesus spoke in parables was to get thru or around our prior filters—and a pretty good way to insure I will never understand or interpret the parables faithfully occurs when I begin by telling Him, "By the way, Jesus, how I think, how I act, how I interpret, how I spend my resources is my own business... And now that we're both clear about that, what is it you wanted me to learn from this parable?" This is an understandable and honest way to interpret the parables, but not the one Jesus has in mind for us.

On to some of the specifics of the story.

“There was a rich man...” Jesus begins. This can’t be a good thing, to have Jesus sum up your entire life as if this were the paramount fact of it. In contrast, one of the most meaningful elements of our family vacation was the chance for all of us to visit the cemetery in Lowell, MA, and the grave of Trish’s deceased mother, Kathleen Cleary Norkunas. Her grown children chose a beautiful and very fitting headstone for her. It lists many of her qualities and accomplishments: things like “loving mother, faithful wife, devoted nurse, survivor of the 1953 Lowell tornado; generous, honest, resourceful, etc.”

But Jesus identifies the rich man only by his wealth, as if this is what overshadowed the other characteristics and qualities in his life. (He dressed in purple and linen; just one of these purple robes would have cost the equivalent of three months’ wages for a working person. Jesus is telling us that the man was way beyond Armani and Gucci; way beyond \$300 haircuts.) There’s nothing so far good or bad about the fact that this man had plenty of money, and dined extravagantly every day (even on the Sabbath, when no work of preparing food was to be done.) The problem comes because there was nothing else to be said about the man. He was very wealthy and he spent an awful lot of money on himself. His priorities didn’t leave room for anything else on his tombstone.

Jesus’ picture of this rich man comes into more clear focus in his relationship with the poor man who begged outside the gate of his mansion. The gate did not have to be impermeable; it was the rich man who made it so, who kept it locked against the beggar. We are not told he abused the poor man, or kicked him when he went by or cursed him. (We are not told about the temperament or personality of the rich man.) Apparently he simply ignored the poor man; acted as if he did not exist.

If the rich man values his money a bit too highly, holds on a bit too tightly, he probably pursues an entire strategy. He keeps very busy, keeps very entertained. He takes pains to stay away from the poor; they may remind him, after all, that their roles might have been reversed. What if he had not been the one in the mansion, in the purple—but the one on the street? What if his style of living, his portfolio, his boat, his second home were suddenly taken from him? At some level he knows there’d be nothing left of him—so he keeps away from those people or places who remind him how temporary, how fleeting are his prizes and how utterly worthless he would feel if he lost them. He knows he can’t afford to rub shoulders or exchange conversation with the poor man at his gate. The beggar keeps reminding him: *What if...?*

If his wealth was so important to him, the rich man’s probably the type who avoids talking or thinking about death. He tells himself he’s interested in living “to the max” in the present, that he’s a practical man—but he’s actually scared to death by death. In pondering death he is reminded that he is bound to lose everything that has given meaning to his life in this world.

He may be making generous contributions to any number of charitable organizations. He tells himself he’s doing his part, trying to help the poor and the society. (And maybe his donations do some good.) But he’s mostly interested in keeping the others at bay: the poor, the diseased, the great unwashed. Write a check, but don’t dare say “hello” or get involved in a personal way. (This is the reason our Christian Mission Committee here has taken such pains to invite all of us to get involved with the orphanage and day care center in Mexico: while our dollars to them are much

appreciated, and very helpful, they don't change us the way face-to-face involvement will.)

Not only has he habitually avoided the poor man at his gate, but the rich man has also come to ignore and avoid God. The man controls his investments, his estate, his properties, his employees. But he has become anxious, egotistical, small. It secretly gnaws on him that he cannot control every eventuality in his life: illness, accident, cancer, even potential market turnarounds remain beyond his control. He has no reason to believe he controls his own eternal destiny, beyond his vain hopes and wishes—so he increasingly keeps his distance from the God who does, and also from the one who reminds him of his responsibilities in this world—the poor man at his gate.

The rich man is no doubt clever. He looks for a moral alibi: “I’ve worked hard for everything I have. Nobody gave me anything; I deserve my wealth. The poor man obviously did not. He probably deserves it. (I mean, how hard could he be trying if he just sits around all day long at my gate? He probably did drugs as a kid—is that my fault, my responsibility?...) Besides, I give to charity all the time—in fact, I’m rather generous...”

Do you know the drill? I sure do. I’m not that wealthy, I don’t dress in Armani suits (though sometimes my longsuffering wife wishes I would throw out some of what I consider my favorite, most reliable clothes, which I have been wearing since about the mid- 80’s.) I tithe to my church. And as a matter of fact, I have made responsible choices, I have worked hard, blah, blah, blah... But the fact is when we were visiting New York and Washington, and came upon homeless people, I often passed them by with fewer pangs of conscience than I used to—and that’s not something I’m proud of.)

We don’t have to be wealthy as Warren Buffett to be identified with this rich man. (In the eyes of about 3 billion people in the world, most of us here this morning are unimaginably wealthy.) But Jesus is cautioning each one of us, no matter our bank account: beware anything that becomes overly important in our own eyes. Do not ignore, do not despise those without. Every gift from God (most surely our dollars) and every resource we possess or control is designed to be offered to Him in willing obedience. And every blessing can easily become a stumbling block which only keeps us separated from Him.

(I often think of the difficult task Mary Anderson constantly faces in her ministry, along with the rest of us, to our teenagers. They mostly come from happy families and enjoy excellent health and vitality; they mostly have ambitions to go to college and to work hard and achieve in this lifetime; they tend to be involved in their sports and their activities; they study hard; they have access to DVDs and favorite songs by the thousands, [the tens of thousands?] in their personal ipods; they text message their circle of friends instantly in real time. They are too young to worry much about death and they are too busy to worry much about adult-type angst. Oh, they have very real anxieties and pressures of their own—but Mary would never try to “guilt” or manipulate them closer to Jesus. How is she to convince them that Jesus is more important, more necessary, more sustaining than all these appeals of this world? (For that matter, the Holy Spirit faces the same difficult task in many of us: each of us also enjoys so many nice options in this lifetime. “But what is impossible with human beings is possible with God;” [Lk 18:27] in Him all things are possible.)

No one can serve two masters: not a slave, not the Pharisees, not the rich man, not you, not me. God is the author of everything good gift we enjoy. Our happy temperament; our optimistic outlook; our strong family relationships; our many options for employment and amusement and travel—even our desires to work hard, our pleasure in providing for our families come from God. But every one of these good things can become a substitute god or a false master which will not lead us into eternal life.

But time passes, life goes on. Truth is deferred, but not defeated. “The rich man died.” Now he learns something very different. No moral alibis, no rationalizations hold any water down there. Suddenly he sees how differently weigh the scales and balances in the eyes of God. All his own wisdom, his own priorities, his own motivations, his own assessments, the assessments of his peers—all of it counts for naught. He knows he’s in big trouble.

There’s also the poor man in this parable. He’s portrayed as a wretched fellow. But there’s one detail we do know, which is about all we need to know. Jesus gives him a name: “Lazarus”—Greek transliteration for the Hebrew “Eleazar,” which means “God helps me.” God helps me. (Now let’s not romanticize this situation: I have worked with the very poor and the broken and there’s nothing necessarily noble or exemplary about being poor, any more than there’s anything evil about being wealthy.)

But the Bible means a particular kind of poverty when it speaks of “the poor,” and it isn’t primarily about not having enough money. Think of the orphans and widows, the harlots and the tax gatherers and the lepers. Some may happen to have enough money, but in their culture they have no currency with which to buy acceptance. Others around them recognize no merit within them. They can’t buy happiness or common human dignity. As a result they are much more likely than those with better options to turn to the God who provides, to “the God who helps” them.

Just as each of us, if we have ever come to the end of our own resources, our own smarts, may then have learned “God helps me.” (Not mouthed the words, but experienced the reality.) If we have lost the normal securities and systems in which we had trusted—whether by medical scare, or natural catastrophe, or loss of a loved one, or depression, or by some great private shame or guilt we have incurred. In times like these we learn God *will* help us; God *can* be trusted—when finally we see no other way forward; when we cast ourselves upon Him desperately and absolutely.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit...” Being hungry is no guarantee we will trust in God to provide; the prick of a guilty conscience is no guarantee we will throw ourselves upon the mercy of God in repentance—but when we are poor in these ways we are more near to the kingdom than when we were trusting in our own riches, our own self-sufficiency of every kind. “God will not despise a broken and contrite heart...” [Ps 51:17]

Here’s another scene change: we come to the next part of the parable. Jesus invites us to witness this melodrama taking place on the other side of the curtain of death, where everything is evaluated so differently. Think of a thin curtain at our life’s end. [Or think of the metal detector you pass thru at the airport—a lot of things cannot make it thru. If you’ll pardon the image, Abraham is saying we must pass thru the great idol detector enroute to our Final Destination...] We find that the poor man owned nothing

and so lost nothing at his death. In fact he held on to the only thing transferable beyond the curtain: his trust that “God is [his] Helper.” In contrast, the rich man had so much—but none of it transferred beyond that curtain of death. He lost everything. He could afford the fancy distractions which served to disguise his emptiness in this lifetime—but now all stands revealed.

This is what hell is: not only to be separated from God, but to be aware of that separation. Many persons choose no intentional communion with God thru Christ, but do not experience hell any more than the rich man did as long as he clung to his usual pleasures. Be careful when you find yourself wanting to keep busy, wanting to keep distracted, wanting to keep amused. Subtle, flashing warning signs. Be aware!

Interesting that the chasm which the rich man could easily have crossed in life (all he needed to do was to go out and say “good morning” to the poor man, or asked him his name, or about the wife and kids, not to mention invite him in for a nice meal now and then)—but the chasm is now fixed as one which he may no longer cross. The situation awaiting him after he dies mirrors the reality he chose while he was still living.

I do not believe this fixed chasm between the two is permanent—at least not by the hand of God. It is impassable for now. (This lifetime is serious business, and not to be squandered! There are consequences to our procrastinations, our choices, our habits, our lifestyles.) But what is making me hold back from God today? What keeps me from praying as often and as fervently as I keep saying I would like? Why is it I keep compromising the position of the Holy Spirit [in Cass’s memorable phrase] and so seldom my own? Why do I think things between God and me will naturally get easier, the longer I put them off?

The final scene of the parable draws us into the key to unlocking the meaning of the whole thing. At last, the rich man shows some concern for others—he sure doesn’t want his five brothers to have to learn this same lesson the hard way.

[I believe this parable was directed, at the first level, as an allegorical warning the Pharisees, who took a particular pride in being sons of “father Abraham” (as did the rich man) and particular interest in the temple wherein God dwelt, in “my [the rich man’s] father’s house.” [v 27] The “five” is often symbolic of the five books of the Torah recognized by the Pharisees, and Luke has already told us Jesus directed this parable at the Pharisees who were said to be unduly enamored of money.]

The rich man pleads with Abraham, the one in charge, to please send even the poor man to go back and warn his brothers. “Please, Please, don’t let this happen to them! Have mercy; please spare them. They’ll surely believe, and repent, if someone goes back from the dead to warn them.” But Abraham is unmoved: “No, they won’t either. If they’ve managed to ignore Moses and the prophets all this time—that is, most of the Old Testament, the word of God—they’ll have no trouble managing to ignore even the living Word of God, the One risen from the dead.” [v 31]

The key to the parable is what those five brothers do with what they have been taught already! The choice has been theirs, all along. And to one extent or another, each of us this morning is one of those five brothers (or sisters.) The choice has been ours, all along. The choice is ours right now—always right now.

By the grace of God, each one of you this morning has paid attention to the One who has risen from the dead—or you wouldn’t be here! Or you wouldn’t sit still while I

talk to you this way. But the fact remains that each one of us also keeps hiding some of our possessions, our treasures, our hearts from the living God.

To what are you clinging which will never make it thru the curtain out of this lifetime?

Were you maybe hoping for something extra, a little supernatural nudge or a more clear Voice from heaven or maybe a visit from an angel—a little something additional from God’s side to kickstart your prayer life, to bring you a bit more compassion, to help you to be more joyful about giving back to God 10% of your time [that would be one night every ten weeknights, or 5.2 weekend retreats or work parties to the Orphanage in Baja each year, just for the record], your conversation, your talents, your treasure?

God is surely able to surprise and rescue us in unexpected ways—but I think Jesus is having Abraham tell us “don’t count on any supernatural help to get you to doing what you already know how to be doing anyway.”

We have already been visited by the Holy Spirit of the risen Christ. God in Christ has already come across the fixed chasm from death into life. In Him the impassable chasm has been made passable. Jesus has already called you, claimed you, redeemed you... His Spirit keeps speaking into your spirit, directing you in His way, moment by moment.

Jesus is the One who came into the world like Lazarus, that poor man: He was born in the cave outside the city in Bethlehem to a nobody named Mary; He was put to death at Golgotha on the cross outside the city gates of Jerusalem. He went out of His way not to dazzle or amuse folks—so we would know He loves us, and so we can love Him back. He came not as a magician, but as a brother, as a helper, as our Savior.

Oddly, He kept identifying with the poor. “One of the ways I know you love Me is by how you love the poor among you.” (This does not mean we are to become enablers, making it easier for the poor to remain poor, and it does not mean, of course, that we are to think Christ’s Church is not His vehicle for reaching the poor. But it surely must mean that if ever we let the poor drop off our radar screen, or if ever we start to think Christ’s Church, this congregation, is a club for folks “like us” and not for every sister and brother He wants us to reach out and bring in who is willing to come and join with us—then we, like the rich man, are kidding ourselves, and that only for a time.)

In Jesus you and I may surely come to know that God is our Helper.

Now is the time to let go all the things we evaluate so highly and hang onto so tightly—all the things He will not allow to go thru the curtain of death, the great idol detector we must each pass thru.

Hang on to His love, His mercy, His forgiveness. Hang on to the sure love of God in Christ Jesus, in this life and in the life to come.

Luke 16:13-15; 19-31

[Jesus continued, telling them,] "No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him. So he said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God.

"There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried.

In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.' But Abraham said, 'Child, 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, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.' He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to 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.'

Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.'
30 He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"