

Role Reversal
St. Luke 16:19-31

By the time we arrive at this parable, whether we are following the lectionary or just reading through the Gospels, we have heard a lot of talk about wealth and poverty. There is the renowned “*Blessed are the poor*” in St. Matthew 5:3, that comes to us in the context of the Sermon on the Mount, a sermon in which Jesus consistently turns convention on its head.

St. Luke 12 further tells us about a greedy farmer, who after a bumper crop wanted to simply build the biggest barns in the neighborhood and “*eat, drink, [and] be merry*” (v. 19) for the remainder of his life. This greedy farmer is quickly reminded of the temporary nature of this life, and possessions upon making this decision, however, for he is called a “fool” by God and told that he will die that very night, and his possessions will be divided among other persons (v. 20).

Do we get the point yet? No? Backtrack to where in the first half of St. Luke 16 we met a financial manager who was similarly caught up in the things of this world. This man saw his own economic stability fading because he squandered the wealth of one of his clients, and only upon finding out that he was about to lose it all, did he become an imaginative and energetic financial whiz. This was due primarily to the fact that, like the man for whom he worked, he had made wealth his master.

Today we meet a rich man and a poor man. These two, along with Abraham, have taken up residence in the afterlife. Yes, it’s that Abraham, the one from the Old Testament, the consummate waiter, a man who was promised some land and some descendants, and then waited, and waited, and waited. After the long-awaited arrival of his son Isaac, Abraham was later willing to give up his own flesh at the request of God.

It seems, then, that Abraham is the perfect figure to mediate between the rich man and Lazarus. Famously rich himself, Abraham’s willingness to part with Isaac makes it seem as though any other material thing would have also been sacrificed had God asked him for it.

At any rate, he is clearly in a favorable position in the afterlife, and a man who was previously a beggar in his earthly life, finds some comfort right next to this famously

wealthy Old Testament figure. Meanwhile, the man who was rich in the earthly life can't find any relief.

Do you find some comfort in the rich man's eternal torment, in this reversal of roles from one life to the next? Do you, like me, even want to hear Lazarus taunt the rich man from the safety of Abraham's bosom? The rich man, after all, ignored the hunger of others while having plenty of leftovers at home in the fridge.

For Lazarus and Abraham to defy the rich man, for them to ignore him—well, that seems just right to me. Don't confront me with the fact that I should be able to see that I too am among the wealthy (you, after all, are probably right there with me).

It might seem refreshing—this word about justice—coming from a Jesus who is always preaching about grace. But most important, all of our passages from this series make the point that following God is not simply about intellectual belief. In spite of what many have said, belief in the right God or doctrine is only part of what it means to be a person of faith as it is depicted in Scripture. Jesus presupposes that there will be solidarity.

This is true not only of the Christianity presented by St. Luke, who has given us these examples of persons consumed by their wealth, but it is true of the faith presented to us by other Gospels and epistles.

St. Paul implies in Romans 12 that the renewal of our minds will lead to the transformation of our character. St. James emphasizes that "*faith without works is . . . dead*" (St. James 2:26). Please don't forget Jesus' parable about the sheep and the goats. You know, the one in which he boldly teaches that inasmuch as you have helped or harmed "*the least of these*" (St. Matthew 25:40), the poor among us, you have helped or harmed God and will be judged accordingly?

Christianity, at least as it is presented by the Bible, is not about some sort of intellectual assent, nor even about some feeling in your heart, but belief in the sense that you are so attached to a truth, that it causes you to go out and do something. As St. James put it, you are to become "*a doer of the Word.*"

Even in Jesus' time, this understanding of following God was not new. This seems to be the other point St. Luke is making through Jesus, or better, through Jesus' use of Abraham and other Old Testament figures. Jesus absorbed the stories of these characters as a child, and he can therefore immediately envision Abraham saying to the rich man who wanted to "go back" and warn his relatives, "*Listen, they have Moses and the prophets . . . you had Moses and the prophets.*"

I imagine Jesus himself saying later to a few of the disciples, *“Look, some of this is old stuff, it is tried and true. I’ve just come to fulfill this.”* He knew that Deuteronomy 15 emphasizes that the rich have a moral responsibility to help the poor, that Amos’s God is relentless in his criticism of the people when they do not care for the poor. Amos even proclaims that of such unthinking persons, the Lord says, *“I will crush you”* (Amos 2:13 NIV).

All of Scripture, then, tells us that our faith doesn’t stop at intellectual belief, and that piety cannot end at our front gates. But, Lazarus in his earthly life slipped right through the cracks, kind of like that old lost coin from another parable.

Lazarus too is found by the great Searcher, but the Gospel for today is just as tough: whereas we have found Lazarus, we meet a rich man who is utterly lost himself, and we must wonder whether he will ever be found. Not because of his wealth—again, Abraham better than anyone knew wealth—but because he was blinded by it instead of using it for good. Is this just? Is this love? May God use these difficult words to give us a heart for the lost—poor and rich alike. Alleluia. Amen.