

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Reversal of Fortune”

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Reverend Art Ritter

Luke 16:19-31

19 'There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²²The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴He 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." ²⁵But 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. ²⁶Besides 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." ²⁷He said, "Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house—²⁸for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment." ²⁹Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them." ³⁰He said, "No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent." ³¹He 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." '

There is a story about a woman who lived her life with every kind of luxury known to human beings. She had the largest house in the neighborhood. She spent all of her time and money caring for it. She possessed the finest of furniture. Her walls were paneled in expensive wood and her floors were laid with jeweled tiles. She delighted in collecting rare art pieces to hang from the walls and adorn her end tables. Her lawn and flower beds were manicured with meticulous care. The woman's home was a palace. But it also became an obsession. For whenever she heard of something new or something better for her home, the woman had to have it. Money it seemed was no object.

One day the woman died. When she arrived at the gates of heaven, she was anxious to see her new home, the place where she would spend her eternal rest. She hoped that it would be even more glorious than her mansion. An angel came to escort her. Along the way they passed some lovely houses, some much prettier than her earthly home. As they came upon each one the woman thought that this must surely be the house for her. But each time the angel kept walking on. When they had passed through the main streets of heaven, they came to the outskirts where the houses suddenly became smaller. And finally they came to the very end of town, to a house

that was little more than a shack. The angel pointed at it and said, "This house right here, this is your heavenly home." The woman was in shock. "What! That can't be possible! Why, I cannot live in a house like that!" The angel sorted through the paperwork on his clipboard and shook his head sadly. "I'm sorry," he said. "This is your home. It is the best we could do. It is all we could build you with the materials that you sent to us during your earthly lifetime."

We hear a great deal about the widening gap between the rich and the poor in our country, especially during election years. Back in the 1830's Alexis de Tocqueville, visiting our young nation, was very impressed with the fact that there were very few rich in the United States and also very few poor. Everyone was generally equal. Today that is not the case. Figures from a few years ago indicate that the richest 1 percent of Americans have nearly as much wealth as the bottom 95 percent of us. A recent report from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities says that the income gap between rich and poor in America is now at an eight decade high- the largest since before the Great Depression. Economists fear the recession economy will only make things worse because education and job related programs that would raise the income of some will be cut. But we 95 percent are not totally without sin. I have read where the amount of food thrown away daily in an American city would feed an entire European city of comparable size for a day. And the amount of food thrown away in that European city could feed an African or Asian city of comparable size for a day.

Years ago I spoke with a young man who had been an exchange student in Colombia. He had the excellent fortune of staying with a wealthy family. He told me that every night the police had to come and guard the family's garbage, to prevent fights among the poor of the village looking to take it away to feed their families.

Perhaps what is most disturbing, and hits us more personally, is the attitude toward wealth and riches. Instead of an increased concern for needs of others who do not have enough, the philosophy of our culture tends to be acquiring more. Whether we are conscious of the fact or not, many of us are engaged in a contest to keep up or perhaps inch just far enough ahead to be comfortable. It is the drive for more that keeps us going rather than the urge to share of what we already have. In the year 2000, *College Track*, a New York consulting firm did a study of college students. The study found that 93% of students believed financial security was the primary goal of life. Only 43% were concerned about developing a philosophy of life that including service to others.

Thus we come to the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus. You might be surprised to know that sixteen of Jesus' thirty-eight parables were about money. In the Gospels, one out of every ten verses deals directly with money. In the Bible, there are 500 verses on prayer, less than 500 on faith, but more than 2,000 on money and possessions. One minister on an internet discussion this week wrote, "This is just what we need before our stewardship campaign begins in a month- a story about a rich man going to hell!" I hope he wasn't being serious. It seems the central theme to Jesus' teaching was that whether you are rich or poor, your action and your reaction to money and possessions says a lot about your character and your faith.

This story is rather harsh. There is a Rich Man, the picture of extravagance, lying around in his fine purple linen robes, feasting sumptuously on whatever he wishes. There is Lazarus, the epitome of misery and poverty. Lazarus lies in the dust at the

gates of the Rich Man's estate, covered with open sores, starving for just one scrap of leftover food. When death, the great equalizer comes, there is a reversal of fortune. The Rich Man is simply buried while Lazarus is carried away by the angels. The Rich Man goes to Hell, a place of enduring heat and unquenchable thirst. Lazarus goes to the feet of Abraham, enjoying the full reward of God. Yet even while in Hell, the Rich Man still operates as if he is in control of things. He believes that his earthly privilege can require Lazarus to serve his call. He doesn't understand that things have changed. His earthly fortune is worthless. His attitude toward his earthly fortune was the cause of the reversal. His world is no longer structured to meet his wants and demands.

What was the sin of the Rich Man? Was it money and only money? Was he punished simply because he was rich? While Jesus talked a lot about money, I believe he made it clear that money itself was not evil. The Rich Man's sin was more in how he used his wealth. He used all he had to secure his further comfort and security. He claimed to be religious yet did not comprehend that his abuse of comfort oppressed others and ran counter to the words of the prophet and the Law. He was so caught up in self-concern that he did not even notice the needs of one lying in bloody sores at his gate each day. He had the resources to serve God yet he failed to recognize the opportunity. His problem was not his wealth but his apathy and lack of concern for the needs of others.

I think that this is where the parable is supposed to reach out and grab us. It doesn't call money or possession evil. Instead it warns us about how our attitude toward money and possession can separate us from the needs of others and the desires of God.

There is a story about Rose Greenhow, a Confederate spy during the Civil War. When the time came for Rose to leave her Northern -hiding place and make her way back to the safety of the South, she tried to avoid the loss of her material fortune. She converted her possessions into gold and sewed the gold pieces into the hem of her dress. But when the boat she had boarded sank, the weight of the gold made it impossible for her to swim. She sank to the bottom with all of her wealth. She actually was able to take it with her, but it took her nowhere.

I found a quote from a woman named Margaret Young. I was interested and pleased to find that Young was an American jazz singer from the 1920's, a woman born and raised in Detroit. She said, "Often people live their lives backwards: they try to have more things, or more money, in order to do more of what they want so that they will be happier. The way it actually works is the reverse. You must first **be** who you really are, then **do** what you need to do in order to **have** what you really want." Jesus would say that we must first be God's children, do what God's requires, and then we will understand that what we need, God will provide.

Indeed a major teaching of this parable is that as we become more responsive to the hurts, hopes, and needs of others, we will become more aware of our own humanity, of our own insufficiencies, and thereby can appreciate better God's offer of grace through Jesus Christ. That is how those with privilege and blessing are made whole. They come to the understanding that they need what only God can provide. In our lives and in our world, no matter how much we own or possess, there is bound to be a Lazarus at our gates. It is by serving the needs of Lazarus that our true needs are met by God.