

Luke 16:19-31     Bill Uetracht     9.25.25     16 Pentecost

A portion of Abba's song, "Money, Money, Money" was played. This (next) Friday the West Michigan Symphony is providing a tribute to the music of Abba. Therefore, I thought I better do so as well.

"Money, money, money, must be funny, in the rich man's world. Money, money, money, always sunny, in the rich man's world. It's a rich man's world."

It's a rich man's world! That's what many of us believe. That's what we are taught to believe. That's what the world wants us to believe. But that is not what Luke's Jesus believes. Luke's Jesus turns the world upside down. Perhaps you remember what Jesus in Luke says in his sermon on the plain: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Woe to you who are rich for you have received your consolation." It's a poor man's world, I guess.

And that seems to be the message in our gospel text for today. Luke, using what could be labeled an "apocalypse," a story focused on life after death, what Dickens uses in "A Christmas Carol," tells us about a rich man and a poor man. In this case, the poor man has a name, Lazarus, but the rich man isn't given one. The two of them are quite the study in contrasts. The unnamed rich man is dressed in purple and fine linen, which is to say, the most expensive of apparel, designed, I don't know, by Dior, Gucci, and Armani. And Lazarus, the named poor man, is dressed with sores, weeping sores, the kind that dogs like to lick. The rich man lives in a gated community, while Lazarus lies on the ground next to the gate. The rich man eats the finest meals at every meal, while Lazarus gets the crumbs that fall from the rich man's table. (Can you say, a bleeding heart story?)

Lazarus dies and finds himself, through the assistance of some angels, in the lap of Abraham, the great hero of the faith. The rich man is taken to Hades, not quite hell, but obviously not the nicest of places. There in Hades he is tormented, and in the midst of his torment he sees Lazarus who is hanging out with Abraham. Evidently, there was a good part of Hades and a bad part. The rich man is in the bad part, and the poor man is in the good part. From the bad part, the rich man calls out to Abraham, "Have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip his finger in water so that he can cool my tongue." Even from Hades, the rich man feels he can boss the poor man around. Clarence Jordan, the author of "The Cotton Patch Gospel," says that it is as if the rich man is saying: "Father Abraham, send me my water boy. Water boy! Quick. I'm just about to perish down here. I need a drink of water."

But Abraham won't respond to the rich man's demand. "Sorry," Abraham says, "You had it good in life, and Lazarus had it bad. It's a new day here. It's not a rich man's world."

This is such a radical notion. Many of us equate wealth with virtue. We think that if you have more money, you must be . . . smarter, wiser, a better human being. I remember when I was in seminary I worked for a man who had loads of money. He owned big department stores throughout the country. I was hired to blow the leaves off his tennis court and to clean his many windows. The first day I showed up to work on the windows he gave me some Ivory Liquid and towels. That seemed strange to me. I thought the Ivory would leave all kinds of streaks (and it did), but he was rich. He had lots of money. He should know what he was doing.

When I was young, I befriended a boy whose dad was really rich. My friend's family had a lake and a swimming pool, a huge house, an airstrip, bomb shelters, domestic servants. Something I noticed about the father, though, was that he was quite the racist. The way he talked about black people was quite disturbing to me. But he was rich. He couldn't have gotten rich without knowing a lot and being wise. Somehow, I had learned that rich people were something special. After all, it's a rich man's world.

Not in the kingdom of God. In the kingdom of God, life is very different; life is turned upside down. In the kingdom of God, the last are first and the first are last. In the kingdom of God, the blessed are the poor, those who are hungry now, those who weep now. In the kingdom of God, those who aren't named in society have a name.

Wow! This kingdom of God is a very different kingdom, a very different world. It requires us to think in ways that are not normal for the kingdoms of this world. In the kingdoms of this world, the most valued people are those who have the most, who accomplish the most, who do the most. In the kingdom of God, it is different.

Next week at our 10:30 service, our band will sing a song that has these words: "My worth is not in what I own, not in the strength of flesh and bone but in the costly wounds of love at the cross. My worth is not in skill or name, in win or lose, in pride or shame. I will not boast in wealth or might or human wisdom's fleeting light." My worth, the song is saying, is not found in my bank account, my stock portfolio. It is not found in my achievements, my trophies, my awards, my accomplishments. It is found in a love that flows not from us, but from God. And that love, the song tells us, is seen most fully in the cross, which looks nothing like success, riches, or

achievements. The cross looks like failure. It feels like poverty. But this is the place, we say, where God is most fully present. And it is from this suffering love that we are given our worth and our identity.

So, all of our games to prove our worth, to claim it on the basis of how many trophies we have or how large our house is or how cool our cars are are a matter of silliness, illusion. Martin Luther says that “we all are beggars at the cross.” Poor or rich, formally educated or not formally educated, extremely accomplished or not accomplished, we all receive our identity from the God discovered in the messiness and failure of the cross. So, “it’s not a rich man’s world.”

When we realize that, our lives are changed. Admittedly, Abraham in our apocalyptic story from Luke is not very optimistic about the prospect for change. When the rich man asks Abraham to send the dead Lazarus to his brothers to convince them to be generous to the poor, Abe says: “They already know what to do. They have the law. They have the prophets. They have the teaching about the significance of eliminating the chasm between the haves and the have nots. Even if someone were to come back from the dead, (that is, Lazarus,) they are not going to change their ways.”

That’s harsh in my opinion. I am not ready to throw in the towel on us quite yet. What’s more, I suspect that the story is being told so that we might change our ways, so that we might be shocked into paying attention to the folks who are lying at the gates, dying from bombs being dropped, suffering from hunger, malnutrition, and disease. Luke’s story is meant to move us toward generosity. And generosity is at the heart of the Christian calling.

It's at the heart of the law. It's at the heart of the message of the prophets. It's at the heart of what we experience in a dying Jesus *and in a raised Christ*. One *has* been raised from the dead, which says to me that life can be different. It doesn't have to be a rich man's world. Money and what money can buy don't have to run our shows. After all, we know that our worth and our identity don't stem from our financial status, from how much we can accumulate. We are free to let go, free to be generous.

First Timothy today tells us: "Those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction." In other words, money does not give you worth. Don't be preoccupied with it. Don't allow pursuing it to be your obsession.

And then First Timothy says: "As for those who in the present age are rich, commend them not to be haughty. 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."

You got money? Discipline it by sharing it. There is no invitation here to feel guilty about having money, No, the invitation is to make sure that you don't allow money to be that which defines you or other people and that you use it to make the world a better place. You can share it because you know, "It's not a rich man's world; it's God's world." And when it's God's world, generosity and compassion rule.