

## **Privilege & Invisible Suffering**

Last week in preaching on the parable of the dishonest manager, Pastor Barbara alluded to the fact that the Gospel of Luke has a high concern for economics.

This is the fourth parable in a two chapter span that directly deals with that theme.

The parable of the lost coin, the prodigal son, the dishonest manager, and finally today's parable of Lazarus and the rich man.

Kindom economics must have been the part of Jesus' ministry that stirred Luke's heart and compelled him to write a Gospel of his own.

Commentator Alan Culpepper actually suggests that the chapter could have been called "rich men and lovers of money"

From an ancient worldview there was nothing wrong with being rich or a lover of money.

Good people who worked hard and lived righteously could expect to be rewarded with means; likewise, people with means were seen as good (smart, hardworking, righteous) because they were able to acquire wealth. In the ancient world, concepts like wealth, virtue, and masculinity worked together and reinforced one another to solidify elite status.

That was the natural order of things and everyone knew it. The rich knew it, the poor knew it, it was an unchallengeable fact of life.

Which is why it was shocking and scandalous that Jesus would do just that. Jesus challenges the status quo just by telling a parable where the poor man

has a name (Lazarus) and the rich man does not! In fact, Lazarus is the only character in the Gospel parables that is given a name!

Jesus was continually challenging, provoking, making the comfortable uncomfortable. That is the work of the (Kin)dom of God. The systems that made people privileged and comfortable were to be scrutinized, challenged and dismantled if they stood in the way of justice and righteousness. Which is a hard pill to swallow if you benefit from those systems.

This has been a hard text to discern how to preach on today.

Because I don't feel like *we* are uncomfortable yet.

I feel like we are just spectators.

And if *our* wealth and *our* privilege is not addressed then this isn't really a sermon, it is a history lesson.

Part of the problem is that Mennonites consider frugality and thriftiness as one of the things we're actually really good at.

We *agree* with Jesus that wealth is not a sign of virtue, and that the lack of wealth is not a sign of moral failure.

We wholeheartedly *agree* that material wealth is not to be accumulated and that we should distribute what we have to those who have less.

In her last sermon Barbara talked about Mennonite status markers.

Sports cars and designer handbags are not Mennonite status markers.

Reusing your cottage cheese containers to save money and then quietly donating half a million dollars to a Mennonite institution upon your death,

THAT is a Mennonite status marker.

So we consider ourselves distanced and safe from this feasting, royal robe  
wearing rich man.

So what in this parable can challenge *us*, today, in this place.

With its vivid journey to the afterlife, and its exaggerated contrasts (fine  
linens and sumptuous feasts vs hunger and sore covered misery) this parable  
fits the form of an apocalypse.

An apocalypse serves as a wake-up call, pulling back a curtain to open our  
eyes to something we urgently need to see before it is too late.

Think of the dream sequence in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*

Where are we situated in this parable?

Probably not in the role of Lazarus, although plenty of Christians on the  
margins of society and at the bottom of the privileged pyramid have likely  
identified with Lazarus and experienced the hope and promise of the gospel  
message (Luke 6:20, blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom  
of God).

Are we the rich man? Certainly not. We wouldn't flaunt our wealth and allow  
Lazarus to waste away.

Would we?

We're not the bad guy here right?

The interesting and perhaps unsettling thing about this parable is that the  
rich man isn't really a bad guy either.

"The rich man is not pictured as inherently wicked. He does not persecute  
Lazarus, he doesn't refuse him food, he doesn't sponsor legislation to rid the  
gates of poor people like Lazarus.

What if the problem is not malicious maltreatment of the poor, but privilege that allows one to walk past Lazarus every day and never “see” the poor.

“One of the prime dangers of wealth is that it causes blindness.”

This text presents us with the great moral challenge of seeing, and then making visible, the invisible suffering of the world.

Being blind to what is right in front of us is not a phenomenon new to the rich man in our story.

In Matthew 13 Jesus reiterates the words of the prophet Isaiah when he tells his disciples:

The reason I speak to them in parables is that ‘seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.’ With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says:

‘You will indeed listen but never understand,  
and you will indeed look but never perceive.

For this people’s heart has grown dull,  
and their ears are hard of hearing,  
and they have shut their eyes,  
so that they might not look with their eyes,  
and hear with their ears  
and understand with their heart and turn—  
and I would heal them.’

In Matthew 25 we have some reactions that maybe were echoes of the rich man in our story: “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite

you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

Were those who spoke these words trying to hide their misdeeds, or is it possible they were genuinely incredulous, having lived a life blind to the sufferings of others?

There are many factors that contribute to this kind of blindness, but could one of those factors in today's text be wealth, privilege and status?

“The danger is not in wealth itself; rather, the danger is that we become complacent, self-righteous, or uncaring in our wealth. The gifts that we are blessed with, from God, can become a snare for us if we are not mindful that these blessings do come from God, and that they are meant not only to bless us, but the world around us, *through* us.”

In some ways, in a globalized society we have more awareness of the suffering of others than we ever have in human history. Yet the more we become voyeurs upon the faraway sufferings of others, the more helpless we feel to do anything about pain and injustice and the more tempting it is to hide behind our privilege to avoid it.

Turning off the news because it's just too depressing is convenient if you aren't being directly affected by the bad news. Similarly, choosing not to have a thought-out opinion on matters of justice or inequality because it's “too complicated” is a sign that you are privileged enough to disengage without any real consequence.

Scott Bader-Saye writes:

*“Where is the invisible suffering in our world: the suffering of women and children in sweatshops, who are invisible behind the labels we buy; the suffering of animals in factory farms, who are invisible behind our fast food; the suffering of the suspect who is tortured behind locked doors to calm our cancerous fears? We live within political and economic systems that feed upon the sufferings of others, all the while keeping those sufferings invisible. The call of Christ is to refuse to live any longer by those convenient fabrications.*

God does not create poverty; human beings do. What humans create, humans can fix, if they so desire.  
But first we have to take a step outside of the wealth and privilege that allows us to curate our bubbles of comfort.

In torment in Hades, the rich man calls out to Father Abraham, “have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames”

Even in Hades the rich man does not speak to Lazarus but speaks past him, still not really seeing him, asking Abraham that Lazarus might perform the role of a servant, as befit his station.

It's too late for the rich man, but he does reach out on behalf of his five brothers, that they may not experience the same fate.

Abraham responds:

“If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”

The parable suggests that Jesus, the one raised from the dead, proclaims a worldview not bound by cultural assumptions of value or worth. Those who embrace this good news are empowered for repentance, that is, a change of

heart and mind — a change particularly regarding their vision of what (and who) matters.

So maybe we are the rich man in this parable.

But maybe, we are those five siblings of the rich man.

We who are still alive have been warned about our urgent situation. We have Moses and the prophets; we have the scriptures; we have the lessons of God's economy, about God's care for the poor and hungry. We even have someone who has risen from the dead. The question is: Will we — the five sisters and brothers — see?

First Mennonite, may we have discerning hearts, to know when our wealth and privilege can be used for advocacy and change, to learn from and work with our sisters and brothers born into more difficult circumstances.

And may we also realize when we have used our wealth and privilege to insulate ourselves from a world in need, pushing through our discomfort to be the hands and feet of Christ who opened himself up to the suffering of others to do his healing work.