

If you don't come to our Thursday morning Bible study, you should give it a try sometime. I always try to come with some information or insights about the passages we'll read on the upcoming Sunday, but I feel like I always take away more than I give.

Last Thursday, Deacon Joe was with us and he had been reading up on today's Gospel passage too, and shared some fascinating scholarly insights. For example, dogs were considered culturally unclean in the ancient Near East, and never kept as pets, which adds to the reader's pity for Lazarus as well as serving as an ironic foil to the rich man, and perhaps echoing the theme of the compassionate outsider from the parable of the Good Samaritan.

But even more remarkable than that was one of the regular attendees' comments. She said something I never thought I'd hear an American say: "I don't want to be rich." She went on to say that while she has everything she needs, if she had a great deal more, she would just have more to worry about. Simple, yet profound, wisdom.

Rejecting hypothetical riches is one thing, but giving up actual wealth is quite another. And I'm not talking about philanthropy. I can think of only one real-life example of a rich person even temporarily surrendering the comfort and security that money can buy, and deliberately giving up control. But then, the deliberately tasteless, inveterately transgressive filmmaker John Waters, made a career out of doing things other people would never do. Ten years ago, he decided to hitchhike from Baltimore to San Francisco.

He was picked up by a councilman of a small town, who didn't recognize him, and thought he was homeless. He drove him four hours, and then made an effort to catch up with him and drove him another thousand miles. In the end, Waters repaid the favor by letting the councilman stay at his San Francisco apartment. Waters said, "I thought, you know what, he wanted an adventure, too... He's the first Republican I'd ever vote for." The councilman later said, "We are polar opposites when it comes to our politics, religious beliefs. But that's what I loved about the whole trip. It was two people able to agree to disagree and still move on and have a great time. I think that's what America's all about."

Is it, though? Waters's adventure was so unusual that he was able to publish the story as a book, which he titled *Carsick*, because of course he would. But the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, while fictional, feels a lot more familiar. To clarify, this Lazarus is not the same person as the real Lazarus of Bethany, brother of Mary and Martha, whom Jesus raised from the dead. And that raises another point: this parable isn't primarily about heaven and hell, but about how we order our lives.

This parable isn't even about rich and poor; not exactly, anyway. While the parable absolutely does sharply contrast the plights of Lazarus and the rich man, and Jesus has Abraham saying, "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,” Abraham is describing the situation. He does not say that the men’s circumstances in life *caused* their circumstances in death. If every rich person went to hell, that’s where Abraham would be, as Genesis describes him as having great wealth.

So if we’re going to get anything out of this parable, we have to ask, what’s the difference between Abraham and the rich man? And perhaps more perplexing, what do Abraham and Lazarus have in common?

For one thing, Abraham provided for the members of his household, and not just his family, but also those who worked for them, and gave generously to others. The rich man expresses concern for his brothers, but he utterly failed to obey the Biblical injunctions to care for the poor. And he can’t claim ignorance. In death he identifies Lazarus *by name*, making it clear that he knew who he was in life, and easily could have had a servant take Lazarus the discarded bread that had been used to clean the dishes. Abraham went out of his way to give a tenth of his wealth to the priest Melchizedek; the rich man refuses to share even his cast-offs with the desperate man on his doorstep.

More than this, in life, Abraham ordered his whole life around God’s will, acting as a leader yet following God, exercising agency but giving true control over to God. Even when Abraham strayed from God’s plan, he desired to return to God’s ways and made an effort to do so. We see the ultimate test of Abraham’s faithfulness to God when Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son Isaac, although he was more precious to Abraham than all his material wealth.

Everyone is susceptible to thinking they know better than God, but giving in to that feeling sets us on the road to ruin. The rich man hoarded his wealth, ignoring or defying God in a bid to expand his own control. He dressed and entertained to demonstrate what he was capable of, and in death, he tries to control Lazarus through Abraham; even when his concern turns to the fate of his brothers, he attempts to substitute his own plan for the relationship with God that God had intended for them. And that relationship includes the admonitions recorded in the books of “Moses and the prophets,” commanding care for the vulnerable and faithfulness to God.

Many commentators observe that Lazarus is not just silent, but completely passive, for the whole parable, and I suspect that is the point, dramatically illustrated. Like Abraham, Lazarus never had any illusion of being in control of his life. Lazarus and the rich man were dealt different hands, as Abraham points out. The research Deacon Joe shared also made the point that the parable’s Greek wording suggests that well-meaning people brought Lazarus to the rich man’s door, which would not have been surprising at the time. In the end, the rich man brought hell upon himself, and lost all control, while Lazarus is again taken away by beneficent forces. So by telling this parable, Jesus also reminds us that seemingly overwhelming powers like economics, society, and fate are not ultimately in control. Only God is, and we ignore this not only to our own peril, but to the peril of others.

Most Americans order our lives more like that of the rich man than we care to admit. Now some of us, including many members of Advent, give generously of our time and money to help the less fortunate, and that is only ever commendable. But sadly, our generosity is also countercultural, for as a nation, Americans refuse to provide for the basic human needs of many of our brothers and sisters, despite our unprecedented wealth. Widespread chronic homelessness, food insecurity, lack of access to health care, and mass incarceration are not normal for first-world countries; they are the consequences of choices we, as a nation, have made.

And this is not a partisan phenomenon: both major parties care too little for the poor. Voters on both sides ignore the most vulnerable, except when they're blaming the other side for the situation. And this despite compelling evidence that we as a nation would spend less overall by meeting basic human needs than we spend reacting to the consequences of refusing to.

Yet our fear of change, our fear of the other, and perhaps our primal need to have somebody beneath us whom we can control drive us to advocate and vote against both our own best interest, and the best interest of our neighbors. We like to think that we are unlike the destitute, for we earned everything we have, but "we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it." Since God created all things, they all belong to God; even the skills we use to earn a living are gifts from God. We have more in common with the poor than we think.

But this is hard to admit, and the implications are scary. Trust and control issues are for real, even for the faithful who want to trust God enough to always, deliberately, surrender control to God. But I believe that we can overcome this fear by remembering that God's intentions for us include using our autonomy to practice mercy and grace, and that doing so will bring us joy and deep satisfaction. As one commentator points out, the rich man "knows how to be concerned about the welfare of others." "If [the rich man] had just channeled [his concern for his brothers] to Lazarus along the way, both of their lives could have been richer."\*

The things God intends for us, "righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness," these are the things that enrich our lives, for these are the things that reconcile us to those from whom we had been separated. When we "do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share," not only do we help our neighbors, our brothers and sisters, we ourselves become truly rich in this life and the life to come. With all due respect to our friend who didn't want the worries that come with being rich, God has shown us a way of being rich where we can have less to worry about, not more.

\*<https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2013/09/mercy-withheld.html>