

*Too Rich and Too Deaf*

Lessons: 1 Timothy 6:6-10, 17-19; Luke 16:19-31

We talk about “the Lectionary” and say “the readings assigned for today” most every week. But we / I should not assume everyone knows what the Lectionary is. Let’s begin today with a little introduction about how the scripture lessons wind up in the bulletin.

The ecumenical body of the major parts of the church all over the world has developed a set of readings for Sundays in the Christian year: a Psalm, the Old Testament, the Gospel, and another New Testament reading from the Epistles (the letters). One of the more biographical Gospels is used each year for a three year cycle: Matthew, Mark, and this year Luke. John is more a portrait gospel, and we read it at different Sundays all three years.

There are several reasons Presbyterians use the lectionary: Obviously, the lectionary helps preachers and congregations listen to something from all the books of the Bible over a three year period. Then there is the other help: Sometimes we have lessons assigned that we would rather just skip – and move to the easier, nicer, more comforting passages. For lots of reasons, ministers tend to skip over the tough passages, and the lectionary keeps us looking where we might not want to look. The lectionary makes us listen to scripture lessons – like them or not, instead of just pick the lessons we like.

Now you know why we have heard a lot of Luke this year, and why we have had to look at some tough passages. The truth is, if you take out the tough passages from the gospels, you don’t have much left. For the better part, Jesus just was not “into” the easier, nicer, more comforting words.

So, today, the assigned lessons are about money, and it’s not even Stewardship season. For some strange reason, people don’t like to talk about money in a sanctuary. Presbyterians especially have a kind of conspiracy of privacy about money in church. That is the first way we are way different from Jesus. Fully a third of the sayings of Jesus in all the gospels have to do with money and how we use it. Jesus spent a lot of time talking about the rich and the poor. This parable is just one of the occasions.

Luke has already told us the major points of Jesus’ stewardship lessons: Wealth is a deceiver that makes us look at our bank accounts instead of to God for security. We tend to spend more time guarding and tending to our possessions than we do caring for the poor. Giving alms to help the poor is good for us and a primary way Jesus measures our faithfulness.

Then Jesus tells this story to summarize his lessons on money, and to tell us what happens when we do not apply these lessons to our own living.

Like the rich man, we wake up a few moments past death, and find out that we are not living in the same neighborhood anymore. Someone turned off the air conditioning. Guess who? When the used-to-be-comfortable complains, God gives him no relief. God says, “you received all your good things while Lazarus right at your doorstep got nothing. Now it is his turn for the good things, and it’s your turn, too. Now it’s nothing but eternal torment for you!”

Now, Presbyterians don’t like to hear much about heaven and hell in sermons, and to be honest, I’m pretty content to leave all the heaven and hell stuff to God – except for those few

places like this where Jesus is pretty specific about what determines where we wind up. This parable is about what we do and where we wind up. Here are several possible ways we could look at this parable, and most all of them will make us uncomfortable in some way.

- Jesus is saying if we are content to be rich when the only help the poor can get for their open sores is a licking dog, then we are too rich and some day God is eventually going to let us know how those people feel.
- The too rich (which always means the people with more than we have) go to hell because they did not help the poor when they could have.
- The too rich who are too deaf and spend on themselves for lavish living go to hell because they ignore the poor. They do did not even listen to the cries of the poor.
- Jesus is telling the Pharisees who dressed in fine robes and obeyed the law and kept clean and people who thought they were the chosen and the good and pure that if people are poor and dying around them, they better enjoy what they have now, because forever is a long time when you are tormented.
- Jesus is warning the rich of his day that God's punishment for neglect and abuse of the poor may not be swift, but it is sure. Sooner or later, in this life or in the next, God will put the people or the nations that is more concerned with security and ease than with compassion in a place of everlasting torment. (After all, God did that to Judah by sending them to Babylon for 100 years because they had not done justice to the poor.)
- What people do with what they have is more a factor in where they wind up than what they think or even what they believe about Jesus.

Which of these lessons do you think is the one Jesus is trying to communicate here? I'll bet you have already guessed. ...All of the above.

Why would we be shocked to hear that Jesus draws a line in the dirt about money? We have heard it before! Just last week we read where Jesus says, "You cannot serve God and money." Why do we forget his words that if we do not give water to the thirsty or food to the hungry or medical care to the sick or visits to prisoners, we go to hell"?

I think I know why. Part of it is that preachers – especially the Presbyterian kind – avoid unpleasant topics that will make their congregations feel confronted and challenged, or greedy and guilty, or even just warm under the collar even when the air conditioning is a bit on the frosty side.

I think I know why. Part of it is that we just do not read the Bible enough to re-form our ideas about faithfulness from what we want to think to what Jesus says we ought to do.

Let me just say something pretty clearly that comes from a lot more of Jesus' words than just this one lesson: Jesus says that when we are so self-centered that we spend most all of our time and energy and worry and money on ourselves, when we do not give money or time or attention to those who are suffering without the basic necessities of life, then we go to hell. We will suffer the eternal torment of living without because we have turned deaf ear and blind eye and no compassion to the least of God's children. We are the ones who have made them live without.

Heaven will be full of surprises. The poor of the earth will shocked to see that they live forever in joy and comfort beyond their imaging.

And Hell will be full of surprises, too. The too rich and too deaf of the earth will live forever complaining in torment and misery beyond imaging.

Now comes the real question: What about most all of us who think we are not the rich and not the poor? We are neither the rich man nor the poor man in this lesson. What can we do so we don't wind up in hell with a bunch of complaining rich people who expect us to fetch a drink of water for them? Jesus clearly commands that we must be on the side of the poor. How?

We can speak up for the poor, refuse to let the rich or the politicians or even people we find in conversations around ignore the needs of the poor, talk badly about them, or excuse themselves from responsibility for their plight. We can't let that happen without saying something.

We can admit that we think of ourselves as closer to the poor more than to the rich – in part to escape our own responsibility to be compassionate to those who have too little.

We can speak up to the rich – the too rich. We can refuse to listen to their rationalizations that if they get richer we all are better off. I had a father who listened to the change in political economics in the 80's, and was not impressed. He said, "The only trouble with trickle-down economics is that a lot of people only get a trickle." We must warn the too-rich that God's judgment comes to them and to any people or any society that puts lavish living over compassion to the least of God's children. We must remember that God has the power to send nations to hell.

4. We can look at our own checkbooks, and be really honest about how much of our spending is a quest for "the good life" we see in the too rich when Jesus commands us to do some good in the world for the poor.

5. We can be honest about the ways that our first reaction to any talk about money in a sanctuary or anywhere is to think about how we do not have enough. We seldom think first about how much God has given, why God has given it to us, and what God wants us to do with it. We need to be honest with ourselves about how our first justification for doing so little is some excuse about others being in a much better position to help than we are.

After all, Jesus ended the Sermon on the Mount by saying,

Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and o many deeds of power in your name?" Then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers."

Sometimes, Jesus tells us things for our own good – and for his good.

While we are talking about money, let's get it all out in the open. Let's just be honest about how we deal with money in church. The truth is we expect Dives to be a tither, and we excuse ourselves from giving to the church because he doesn't tithe, and we are poor Lazarus. Remember, we are somewhere in between.

Any church that comes to depend upon the largess of a few "Dives" is inevitably in trouble.

Any church that pays its bills through the generosity of a few will have serious problems sooner or later.

Any church that refuses to address financial realities and stewardship responsibilities for more than 25 years will raise a generation of members who think someone else is in a better position to give more.

Any church that participates in the conspiracy of silence about money will have in serious financial problems sooner or later.

That “later” for a lot of churches is right now. The crisis in church economics these days is not about the current recession. We have longer-term problems that are more real.

We can spend all kinds of time explaining why most churches, including this one, are doing less because they have less, but until we come to face a couple of truths with some honesty and some prayer and some change in giving, the other factors in the analysis are pretty irrelevant.

The first truth: Except for the people in a congregation who need financial help from the congregation, everyone in a congregation can and should contribute financially. Giving has NOTHING to do with the church’s bottom line financially. It has everything to do with the lesson of offering that we have in worship every week. Everything we have is a gift from God, and we give an offering back in God’s sanctuary to remind ourselves that we answer to God for how we spend all of God’s money. And we vow in prayers of dedication at the offering that God’s work must become our own.

The second truth: Times have changed, and in the last 25 years our society has moved away from charity toward fund-raising. Organizations now compete for our charity dollars with galas and grants and golf tournaments and global mail lists. That is the way it works in the world these days. ...except for one place. The church does not do grants and galas, golf tournaments and global mailings. We have no mail list of 10,000 people to ask to send us a check. The church cannot be faithful and betray our faithfulness in fund-raising at the same time. The church asks for gifts of “charitas” – the Greek word that means “grace.” Out of the pure and simple grace we have received, we ask for a gift in kind, with no need for a prize or a pat on the back attached.

Added together, both of these truths mean one thing: The church has only the free giving of its own congregation to support all of its life and ministry. This and every congregation is under financial stress and is doing less ministry, and the only solution is for each of us to be honest that the capacity of the church is in each of our hands. Our first gift and our largest gift has to come to the church if we want the church to continue to speak the gospel and do good work and be a conscience that changes our lives for God’s better purpose and makes God’s world to look more like Christ commands.

I’ve never liked the hell-fire sermons, because most of them miss the point. Jesus does not say we go to hell if we have the beliefs or we grew up in the wrong church or we never go baptized to be in the church club. Jesus says that none of us are perfect, but we have to more than talk and call him Lord. Jesus says that we try to live like him and do the kinds of things he did, then we are one of his. And if we are self-centered and selfish, and we think more about ourselves and what we want than what Jesus commands, then we would never be happy in heaven. So we may as well spend eternity with all the rest of the self-centered people. After all, there is one thing sure about hell that we all know: misery loves company.