

Luke 16:19-31

What Does the Lord Require of You

"Oh, Lord, you made many, many poor people
I realize, of course, it's no shame to be poor
But it's no great honor either!
So, what would have been so terrible if I had a small fortune?"
If I were a rich man...

For a certain generation of people if I had sung the line "If I were a rich man" you would immediately have thought of the play made movie, *Fiddler on the Roof*.

It seems to be a theme in our world. Who of us has not dreamt of winning a lottery and what we would do with the money? And most of us would not be disappointed if we had more money with each passing day. Still, we live in a world where that old adage is affirmed, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

Jesus did not shy away from conversations about rich and poor, as much as many people think it inappropriate to talk about money in a sermon. The story just ahead of this one in the Gospel of Luke was about a rich man and his dishonest manager. After Jesus told that story, the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, ridiculed Jesus. It may have been that they thought him ridiculous as everyone knew that those who were pious, faithful and righteous were rewarded with the blessings of power, money, and prestige.

Even today there is a sense in some Christian churches that God blesses with material wealth those who are good and faithful Christians. It is known as the prosperity gospel.

Money, whether it be the ability to barter or have coin in ancient Israel or have money in our time, is necessary and the more you have of it the more power you have to control what happens in your own life. Of course, all of us want to be able to control our own situations so money is a conversation we cannot steer away from even as Christians.

In this part of Luke's writing, Jesus is getting at a couple of points. One is that money has the power to take your focus off of God. It can move you from the things of God and the heart to honouring instead your power and prestige, considering yourself above others.

This story of the rich man and Lazarus continues in that vein, it goes also to the heart of the matter. Who do we see? Who do we ignore? Now I of course am not privy to what is in your bank accounts. I don't know if you are comfortably situated financially or if you are struggling to make ends meet. But I can wonder with you about how we might use

what we have, our resources of time, energy, talent, and money, to meet the needs of and protect those who are more vulnerable than ourselves.

You see, the stories of Jesus show that he had a deep concern for those who were sick, hungry, poor, and imprisoned. This story is just one of many that were either directed at helping others less fortunate or were instances where Jesus himself took care of those who were in need of restoration to healing and wholeness. In the Old Testament, or for the Hebrew people, the Torah, of which these Pharisees would have been experts, they seemed to have only read and remembered the promises about blessings for themselves, but neglected words of protection and help for others.

Deuteronomy 15 verses 7-11 state, "If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be... Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.'" (NRSV)

In the story Jesus told about the rich man and Lazarus, we are led to understand that the rich man had more than just enough. He dressed in purple and fine linen. Purple was definitely the colour of opulence. It was a colour that only the richest could afford as it was such a difficult dye to produce. The rich man also feasted sumptuously every day. This wasn't like a once in a while good meal like we might think of for Christmas, Easter, or Thanksgiving, this was a sumptuous feast everyday.

Outside the gate of his home was this "poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table." It would seem that he was never offered a thing. It was as if the rich man didn't even see Lazarus let alone remember the words of scripture that stated that one was to help those in need. The rich man must have known Lazarus' name as when they both died and the rich man found himself across a gulf that could not be bridged, shut out of heaven and Lazarus was with Father Abraham, he asked Abraham to send Lazarus to help him and when that was denied, he wanted Lazarus to warn the rich man's still living brothers who were living the same life of not seeing or caring of another's need.

Interesting that even in death the rich man feels that he can ask that Lazarus do his bidding. He doesn't even direct his inquiries at Lazarus. It feels like he still doesn't "see" Lazarus. Lazarus is just a means to an end for the rich man.

Now before you think that this story is only about heaven and hell and where we might spend our eternal home, let me redirect you. Might I suggest that this has more to do with how we live today and the choices we make in this lifetime. Jesus is about hearts. This is a story about who we see and don't see, who we care for and those we ignore. It

is a story about love, not romantic love, but God's love shown through us to those around us.

If we were to situate this story in our own time it would not be difficult for those of us at St. Andrew's to do so. Every day we have those examples of Lazarus sitting and laying on the steps of the church. Everyday those of us who work and live in this downtown core are confronted with the story of Lazarus. On Sunday mornings, in order to make every one feel safe and also for safety should we need to exit the building, those who have spent the night or early morning hours on the steps are gently asked to move until after worship. Though you may see people still around, staff are careful to consider the needs of those who are entering the building, especially the elderly.

I am not suggesting that making sure the steps are safe and clean for entry and exit is not important and a necessary task, but it also takes away our being confronted with the poverty, homelessness, and hopelessness that is prevalent particularly in Thunder Bay.

We are happy to bring in food for the food bank remaining arms length from the problems that face so many. But to actually look a homeless indigenous man or woman in the eye and show loving kindness, that is difficult. When we do so we are faced with the inequity between rich and poor, between our blessing and the lack of blessing for others. We are smack dab in the story of the rich man and Lazarus.

One of the lines from the Bible that is a reminder to me, stitched into the stole gifted to me at my ordination, is from Micah 6:8, "...what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." To live this out we must first see people, all people, the poor, the lost, the lonely, the angry, the grieving, those who are sick whether mentally or physically. We need to see the homeless, the hungry, and those in prison.

It is not that you are required to give up all your possessions or give away all your money...but do you see and heed the call to love your neighbour? Not just the one next door but the one who is another human being. Are you able to bridge the divide in between rich and poor, whether that be wealth, health, hope, or love, and see the one in need.

This story is about our hearts. It is about compassion and care for others. Not just the ones we think are worthy, but maybe even more so those who we judge to be unworthy. It is about hardened hearts softening through love. It is about God's love for us and for every human life.

So rather than trying to change things later, lets start seeing all people today. Start with a smile and a hello, but don't let yourself off the hook too easily. Examine your thoughts, your reactions, and continue to grow in compassion and care for other human beings who we know God loves, particularly the lost and those who lay at the gates whether real or imagined. This is God's call on our lives and it is the mission of the church, that all may know God's love and provision through our love and provision.

In Christ, with Christ, and through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.