

“Can the rich man be saved?”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Luke 16:19-31

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For nine years, CBS has been broadcasting the fulfillment of every worker’s dream: to see their boss do *their* job. Suddenly, the Chief Development Officer of Subway is making sandwiches. The CEO of DirecTV is on your roof installing a satellite dish. The Mayor of Cincinnati becomes your local sanitation worker. The person behind the cash register at Family Dollar is none other than the company’s President, while the CEO of Chiquita is a farm worker.

It all happens on an Emmy Award-winning reality TV show called *Undercover Boss*. In each episode, a big-time executive poses as an entry-level worker. (Employees of Westminster, don’t you get any ideas!)

The fun part is seeing the boss fumble through minimum-wage jobs they thought were easy. But what makes the show so special is what happens at the end, when the boss reveals their identity. Justice is had for the cruel or inappropriate store manager; sometimes the boss changes how the company operates. Most moving are the hugs and tears when the CEO tells a single mother that the company’s going to pay for her college education, tells the person who’s worked for decades that they’re finally getting the promotion they deserve, tells the man who’s caring for his aging mother that she’s going to be written into his health benefits.

Obviously, this is all choreographed to promote the company, but there’s something right about the rich and powerful choosing to walk a week in the shoes of their employees, seeing life through their eyes, learning their names and stories, having to serve them. It sounds a bit like the gospel.

The gospel’s all about taking the time to see and love your neighbor as yourself. What most of us struggle with—what I struggle with—is that Jesus asks for a far more radical love than the occasional kind gesture.

When a rich man comes to Jesus asking what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus tells him to sell all that he owns and distribute the money to the poor (Luke 18:18-30). When the man refuses, Jesus declares, “Indeed it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” Jesus tells his disciples that they have to be willing to give up everything to follow him.

For many of us, it feels like Jesus asks too much. Is it really as simple as money means eternal damnation? Is it so wrong to have a bank account? Don’t we also have a responsibility to our family, to our peace of mind and even to the occasional frivolous joy—a meal out, a vacation, a little nice thing for yourself? Are those really so bad?

It's at this point that I want to shout: Jesus, we could really use a hug right now! Instead he tells this really scary story, like some Grimms' fairy tale that gives your children nightmares.

Jesus tells the story of a rich man, who has no name because he could be any of us. Every day, he walks by a man named Lazarus, homeless and starving, covered with sores. Every day, he eats a nice meal while Lazarus watches through the window. One day, he dies; so does Lazarus. Lazarus goes up, the rich man down—to a place where he is tormented by fire. Among the flames, he sees, high above, Abraham and Lazarus, and begs for mercy. Abraham says he will receive none. He says a great chasm has been fixed between the rich man and Lazarus; the gate to the rich man's house that once separated them has become permanent, but this time, Lazarus is on the inside.

Oh there is a chasm, all right, between Lazarus and the rich man, but it's not wealth. Throughout the Bible there are people who feast, and yet are saved by God—Kings David and Solomon, Esther, the magi who come bearing gifts. Wealth alone is not the sin. The chasm lies in the rich man's inability to imagine Lazarus as anything other than “an extension of himself and his own needs” (Janet Hunt). He does not love Lazarus; he uses Lazarus. Even in death, the rich man asks that Lazarus serve him, first with a cool drink of water, and second by visiting his brothers and warning them. Never once does he speak directly to Lazarus; he speaks only to Abraham, asking Abraham to command Lazarus, still the servant, still the slave, still the nobody that he used to step over.

The rich man, even in death, even in beholding the glory of Lazarus, never stopped to consider Lazarus as a separate person with his own right to life, his own desires and needs. He never stopped to think that this was somebody's son, somebody's brother, maybe somebody's father. He certainly never dreamed that this wretch was a child of God, and thus *his* brother.

The rich man cannot love Lazarus, because in truth he doesn't love God either. Almost 500 years ago, Martin Luther, preaching on this same parable, said, “For this rich man is not punished because he indulged in sumptuous fare and fine clothes... but because his heart was attached to them, sought them, trusted in and chose them, and because he found in them all his joy, delight and pleasure; and made them in fact his idols... [he] served only himself.”

And this is where wealth becomes a factor. The rich man's sin is not that he is wealthy. But it was his wealth that made it so easy for him to sin, and this is why Jesus talks so much about wealth—more than almost anything else in the Gospels. We all have need in our lives—for love and justice, for purpose and joy, for God—but wealth papers over that need. It can make us think that we don't need God or other people. And the wealthier we get, the more the world seems to exist to serve us, and the less we experience of people's suffering and injustice, till their pain becomes easier to ignore or dismiss.

It's one of the reasons why faith and movements for justice are flourishing in the Global South. The church is growing. But here, in the Global North, where we have so much privilege, the church is dying. And not just the church, but any commitment to being part of something larger than ourselves. Because, thanks to wealth, a lot of folks can't imagine *anything* larger than themselves.

We'd like to think that this doesn't apply to us. Most of us don't think of ourselves as very wealthy, certainly not part of the 1 percent (or if you do, you really need to amp up your giving to the church). Some of us are Lazarus. But a lot of us are wealthy when you consider how most people live around the world. A lot of us have property and shelter, a steady supply of food and clothing, running water and indoor plumbing, healthcare, discretionary income. And a lot of us have someone like Lazarus in our lives—someone we're not seeing, someone we're not loving or helping. It's not a sin to enjoy life. It's not a sin to have wealth. I don't think God is going to condemn us because we've got a savings account. But we have to be careful, because it can so easily, without us knowing it, lead us into sin, lead us into living for ourselves, rather than for God and neighbor. And suddenly, there's this chasm.

There is, however, hope. Despite what Abraham says about no one being able to cross the chasm, there is One who has done it. The ultimate rich man, the ultimate undercover boss: Jesus Christ. He had it all—the riches of God and heaven, all-powerful and eternal. Yet he chose to become one of us, to take on our poverty, our wounds, to act as servant to us, to see and love us. He even descended to hell to carry us out on his back.

After describing how impossible it is for someone with wealth to enter the kingdom of God, Jesus then says, “What is impossible for mortals is possible for God.”

Jesus' parable is just a story, and its ending can be rewritten. Most of us aren't Lazarus *or* the rich man in this story. We're the brothers, still alive, still with a chance. And we have been visited by Someone who has risen from the dead, who has crossed the chasm and made it possible for us to cross too. Will it be enough? Abraham is skeptical. The way is open, but we have to believe; we have to let God's love into our hearts; we have to recognize our need for that love.

Can the rich man be saved? Yes, if he can accept that, in Christ, everything has changed. He's no longer the rich man, with a power hierarchy that defers to him and privileges him over others. He is a servant—of a love that would invite Lazarus in, break bread with him, learn his story, wash his feet.

Can we be saved? Yes, if we can look at the Lazarus in our life and see Christ, if we can love him more than our wealth, even at the expense of our wealth. So remember: the question isn't whether you have wealth or not, it's whether your wealth serves you alone or serves others.

Amen.