

Deaf

September 25, 2016 Luke 16:19-31

Rev. Lesley Weir

Here we go again! Always the same thing with Luke; 'there was a rich man.' How many of our gospel stories these last few months have started the same way. There was a rich man who had an over abundant crop, so he built bigger barns. There was a rich man who had a dishonest manager. Today there is a rich man who wears purple. In a few weeks we will hear about a rich man named Zacchaeus. Are you getting tired of it? Almost gets to be a nagging sort of phrase, doesn't it? Hmm, maybe that's Luke's objective. When do we nag people? When we really really want them to do something. When we really really want them to understand something. When we really really want them to listen to us.

And that is indeed what Luke is up to. Not just these last few months, but really throughout his entire gospel. He starts right out in the beginning with Mary proclaiming that the rich will be toppled. And he keeps it up straight to the end. Why this nagging? Because he really wants us to listen to him. He really wants us to understand his major point. He really wants us to do something. What does he want us to hear, to understand, and to do? He wants us to hear Jesus' warnings about the danger of wealth. Last week's story ended with the admonition that you cannot serve wealth AND God. Pick one. Pick the right one! Hear Jesus' teachings and his warnings over and over. Hear him and listen to him so we will understand. That's what Luke wants.

What is that we need to understand? That no matter how we try to fool ourselves, wealth, possessions, accumulation of stuff, has the power to take over our hearts, our souls and our lives. That the need for more and more is a dangerous hole that can never be filled. That the pursuit of that more and more leaves us exhausted, actually empty inside, and always on the search for something else. That hole Jesus says, can only be filled by God. So go seek God. Go spend your time and efforts in finding God, not raising your bank balance.

And if we hear Jesus and understand his message, what are we to do? Why, give it away! Be abundantly generous. Why? Because Jesus knows this is the way to our own abundant life. Because Jesus is trying to protect us from the ruin and destruction that comes from a life focused on wealth. Because Jesus wants the very best for us. Because Jesus knows that a true and real relationship with God is what sustains us. When our lives fall apart....and they will; if they have not already, trust me, they will....so when our lives fall apart, no six figure savings account will provide comfort. No basement full of boxes will cry with us. No rental storage unit overflowing with our overflow will give us guidance and assurance. No. All those needs that wash over us when our lives fall apart come from one and only one source; God creator, redeemer and sanctifier. Jesus loves us THAT much that he nags and nags to get us to listen and then move to action. And there's more to Jesus' wisdom. He knows that the world is an unfair inequitable place. That some, like us gathered here today, have opportunities and experiences and education almost beyond measure. But others, they look with longing on our lives, the way Lazarus longed to satisfy his hunger from the rich man's scraps. And Jesus calls us to do what we can to alleviate the suffering of others.

Trouble is, we often remain deaf. We don't listen. We may hear, but we don't heed. And that is the crux of today's parable. There is the rich man, this one in purple and fine linens. There is Lazarus, poor sick man, lying in the gutter. The purple robed rich man pays no attention to Lazarus. He must know he exists, since he calls him by name, but he doesn't really see him. Lazarus dies and the angels whisk him from the torment of his earthly life to the sweet bliss of being with Abraham. The rich man dies as well, ending up in the torment of Hades. He seeks relief from Abraham, but he is told it is too late for him. In a

somewhat compassionate move, he then seeks intervention for his brothers. Please, he says, please warn my brothers to mend their ways so they don't end up like me.

Hmmmm....tell my brothers. Warn them. And Abraham is like....warn them? They've been warned. YOU were warned. You had your scriptures. You had Moses and the prophets. Did YOU listen? Did YOU pay attention? Did YOU mend YOUR ways? No....you were deaf to all that Moses and the Prophets told you. Deaf. And the rich man admits as much. Admits his brothers won't hear and heed Moses and the Prophets either. BUT....but if you sent Lazarus, if you sent a dead man back from the grave....now that... THAT would be something. THAT would get their attention. THAT would get them to listen.

Of course we know, as does Abraham, that that won't work either. That those who pay no heed to Moses, to prophets, to scripture....they won't pay any heed to someone back from the dead either. And the fact is rather stunning and rather in our faces, isn't it? Because of course, we have our own back-from-the-dead guy. And yet, we continue to be deaf to much of what he tried to teach us before he died! It leaves you with all sorts of obvious questions. Questions like; who WILL we listen to? What WOULD it take for us to hear and heed? What would have to happen for us to hear? Why won't we listen? Yes, the questions spring quickly and easily.

Justo Gonzales sums it up well. He says: "There is no miracle capable of leading to faith and obedience when one has vested interests and values that one places above obedience to God, such as 'the love of money,' of the Pharisees whom Jesus is addressing... The main obstacle to faith is not lack of proof- its an excess of other interests and investments- of time, money, dreams, and so on."

So what do we take away from this parable this morning? Well, clearly, once again, it's about money. Specifically us and money...our relationship with money. It's also about what we do with that money, how we steward what has so generously been given to us. And it's also about our ability to hear and heed Jesus' warnings about that money. And as a quick recap of what he tells us, it is that wealth can take over our lives if we are not careful. And that abundant life exists in generosity, in giving away. He tells us that where our heart is....that's where our money will go. Do you know scientifically, folks who are extremely generous are happier than stingy folks? Think about that for a minute! Yes, this parable is not about trying to seek the best afterlife, but rather trying to seek the abundant life possible now.

So it seems to me we've boiled this down to a few key points; are we deaf to Jesus' teachings or are we looking to follow him? Who are the poor that linger at our gates? Do we see them? Are we willing to share our abundance with others in ways that make their lives better?

In pondering this text all week, I kept going back to a recent incident. A few weeks ago, the capital campaign folks were meeting in my office. It was dusk to dark time of day. It was also a Wednesday evening in August. So the building was bustling with guests who would have dinner and spend the night in our nice air conditioned building. It was an example of hearing Jesus' call to care for those at our gates. It was an example of us generously sharing our wealth with those in need. And that should make us happy. Remember, generous people are happy people!

And then I looked up just in time to glance a shadow go across my window towards the front doors, doors that are always locked on Wednesday nights. I wondered if I should get up and to let the person in. But I realized someone else had gone to get the door. And then I saw a woman in a wheel chair roll past my office door towards the restrooms. And soon enough, I watched her roll back to the front door, go back outside and cross back in front of my window. And I sat there stunned. Another member of the committee had witnessed the whole thing as well. And we looked at each other and then looked at the

other members of the committee and said 'THAT THAT is why we must do this project.' So no more folks with mobility issues have to go outside and around our building to get from one level to the other, to get from Heller Hall to the accessible washroom on the other level. And remember...this was a lovely August evening. This same scenario takes place year round, through driving rains of autumn, the freezing snows of winter.

Perhaps you think I've become a nag up here. That week in and week out Luke warns us and nags us about wealth. and week in and week out I nag about the renovations and their importance. The thing is this is your church, not mine. I will move on one day. But I think this project is so important that like Luke, I will continue to talk about this. I will continue to ask you to reflect upon the importance of the continued presence of St. Luke in Downers Grove. Churches are closing all over the place because the cost of deferred maintenance is overwhelming their budgets. Do we realize that if we do not maintain and update our building now, it will become cost prohibitive in the future? And then where will the homeless of our area find a hot meal and a place to sleep? Where will the next generations hear the stories of faith and become disciples? It is not about us, but about others.

So, do we see the poor at our gates and share what we have to help them? Some of them. But there are others whom we have turned a blind eye to. Folks who cannot maneuver stairs. Folks who nervously come for their first Alcoholic Anonymous meeting and can't figure out how to get into the building, let alone where to go once they are inside. Families and residents who may long for a connection to a community just like this, but nothing about our facility says 'come on in'. Do we see the future generations and future members who will need this gathering space for their ministries, just like those back in the 60s saw us?

In March Delta unrolled the plans for Let Us Build a House....a house where all really are welcomed with radical hospitality. The campaign to fund Let Us Build a House is gearing up now. When we are asked to give to the renovations, what will we do? Will we give joyously and generously? Will we remember the story of the wheelchair bound woman who had to go outside to use the restroom? Will we see her and her needs? Or will we be like the rich man in purple who never really saw Lazarus? It's time to listen to Jesus. It's time to ask ourselves how our lives reflect the story of the one who DID come back from the dead. Amen.