

Wesley United Methodist Church

September 25, 2016

Text: 1 Timothy 6:6-19

Luke 16:19-31

**Title: I Don't Want to Miss What Matters**

Many of you know that several years ago I went through a time when I could hardly walk, and standing was very painful. I was unable to do most of my work and I missed out on time with grandchildren, friends, and other things that were important to me. I also spend a fair amount of time with people who are dealing with the death of someone they love, or the loss of an ability or dream. Things that we have taken for granted can be snatched away from us in a heartbeat. Other times we are aware that we are losing something or someone really important to us and we wonder how we will live with that drastic change in our lives.

These kinds of things may cause us to re-evaluate our lives and look at what really matters to us. Sometimes we make changes that bring our lives more in line with what we identify as our priorities – sometimes we think that those kind of changes are not practical or sometimes even impossible. It is good to stop and take stock of our lives from time to time and to make adjustments. There is a problem with this, however and I believe, it comes most frequently when we try to do that kind of review by ourselves. We all have blind spots so we cannot always see what others see.

Grandchildren are great in helping with some of those blind spots. Their innocence and honesty often causes them to say things that we adults would not say to each other but that we sometimes need to hear. Covenant groups – a group of people whom we trust and meet with regularly to discuss our spiritual life – can be another way of sometimes

hearing something we need to hear and having some of those blind spots wiped away. Our families and friends can sometimes be those places for us if we are willing to really listen and to be open to what they say without being ready to jump in with our quick explanations or quickly dismissing what they are saying as nagging. Sometimes, however, our closest friends and family members can also help contribute to our blind spots helping to create spiritual cataracts that make our vision cloudy or unclear.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus tells a parable about a man who had a severe case of spiritual blindness that had a serious impact on his life. Oh, his physical vision was certainly good enough, and he thought his life was just fine. He was super wealthy. He wore purple clothes which in Jesus day were made from an expensive cloth that was dyed with a secretion from a rare species of shellfish. Not something that most people would ever wear, and often reserved for royalty. He lived in a gated community and ate all the finest food **all the time**. Every meal for him was a huge banquet.

There were many who believed that if a person was wealthy that this was a sign that they were specially blessed by God and those who lived in poverty were in some way cursed by God. Today, there are still preachers of a prosperity gospel who preach that financial blessing and physical well-being is always the will of God for Christians, and that faith, positive speech, and donations will increase one's material wealth. The prosperity theology views the Bible as a contract between God and humans: if humans have faith in God, then God will deliver security and prosperity. Sickness and poverty are viewed as curses to be broken by faith and achieved through donations of money, visualization, and positive confession.<sup>1</sup> It's almost as if God is considered the great vending machine

of heaven, put in enough money, prayers, good works, and God will dispense all the good things we want and a life free from any hassles, problems or disappointments.

If this is the case, then the rich man in today's parable is hugely blessed. But there is another character in this parable. I don't know if you have ever noticed this or not, but in all of the parables Jesus told, this is the only one where someone is given a name. His name is Lazarus which means, "God is my help." He is poor and sick. He is unable to even fight off the dogs that come around and lick his sores. He lays outside the gate of the rich man's home waiting and hoping that when the rich man has finished his meals, he will be able to eat what has fallen from the man's table.

In this culture food was eaten with the hands, and in very wealthy houses, the hands which would have become greasy and covered were food, were cleansed by wiping them on hunks of bread, which were then thrown away. Can you see the wealth here, using food to clean one's hands and then throwing it away? This is what Lazarus was hoping to be able to eat – hunks of bread that have been rubbed on the rich man's hands, with some small remnants of food clinging to them.

How strange it is that in all of Jesus' parables only once is a character given a name and it is this poor sick beggar and his name means, "God is my help." If anything, it looks as if God is doing anything but helping him. You may have heard the rich man called Dives – a name given to him by tradition – which simply means "rich man". I wonder why some have felt it necessary to give the rich man a name, and suspect that it is only because the beggar is named and it is uncomfortable for most of us to have the

beggar receive the importance of being given a name, while the rich man remains anonymous.

In time both men die. In a strange reversal of fate, the one who would have been considered blessed, the rich man, finds himself being tormented in hell. Lazarus, the poor sick beggar, considered cursed in life, finds himself carried away to the side of Abraham – essentially to what would be considered heaven in our terminology.

Remembering that this is a parable, a story, we might ask, “What did the rich man do to deserve his fate? What did he do wrong? He had not ordered Lazarus to be removed from his gate. He did not make any objection to Lazarus receiving the bread that was thrown away from the table. He did not kick him or abuse him as he went past him. He was never deliberately cruel to him”.

Commentators suggest that his real sin was in never really noticing Lazarus. He had accepted him as part of the landscape and thought it perfectly natural and okay that Lazarus should lie in pain and suffering while he had not only more than enough but more than more than enough. In this parable his punishment is the punishment of a man who never noticed the needs around him. It is the punishment of a man who thought of himself as more important than anyone else.

Notice that when he speaks to Abraham, he begs for pity and asks Abraham to send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool the rich man’s tongue. Even at this point the only acknowledgement of Lazarus is as a tool to take care of him. When he realizes that he is not going to get any comfort, he finally thinks about his five brothers who he doesn’t want to experience this same torment. Once again, Lazarus is

nothing more than a tool to do his bidding. Send Lazarus to my father's house to warn my brothers.

Abraham once again refuses and reminds the man that they had Moses and the prophets to teach them about how they were supposed to live. The rich man – who is not so rich anymore – argues that if someone rises from the dead his brothers will listen and repent. Abraham replies that “if they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”

As Jesus is telling this story, we cannot help but look back with eyesight that is 20/20 and think that he is warning his listeners that even after he dies and rises from the dead, people will still not be convinced. Sadly, it is a fact that people may possess the truth of God's word and still not believe, still not be affected by it, may still not do anything in their lives that makes a difference.

This parable seems to be a pretty clear argument against the prosperity gospel. You have heard me say before, and undoubtedly, you will hear me say again that I do not believe that there is anything wrong in having money, and now I would add health, family, resources, any of those things that we love and consider good. I do believe that God wants us the best for us – but I believe that God wants the best for all persons, and what we consider the best may not necessarily be what God considers to be the best.

Our wealth is not the best for us if it causes us to be blind to the needs and people around us. Our health is not the best for us, if it becomes our God and is the focus of our lives. Even our family is not the best for us if it blinds us to everything else. We know of too many cases where a person's wealth and sense of self-importance is the excuse for any

and all behavior that in some cases can be considered nothing less than evil. We have heard of young men whose parents hid them away or used their money and power so that they would not have to face the consequences of raping a young woman or killing another person. This is when power and wealth become dangerous not only to ourselves but also to others.

Our reading from 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy tells us that the real gain in being a Christian is not in wealth, but in a sense of spiritual fulfillment that helps us rise above the greed and desire for more and more material possessions – things that are never quite enough, and never really do bring fulfillment to life. I was talking with a friend the other night and she was telling me that in her position as pastor of a particular church, that morning she had met her first billionaire. She described the work that he was doing with his vast wealth to help people in what we would call third world countries to begin their own small businesses, where people can be trained and have jobs and where items are produced and sold at a fair market value. This is so very different from some of the large corporations that may provide jobs for women and children primarily in sweat shops where the system is designed to keep them in poverty and distress.

In 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy, Paul tells us that the godly disciple shuns the quest for wealth for the sake of wealth and instead “fights the good fight of faith” by living a life that witnesses to God’s great love. He urges those who are wealthy to do good with their wealth, to be generous and to share it. A life that is devoted to service, using our material resources to glorify God and benefit the needy also gives us a sense of fulfillment that is far superior to conspicuous consumption and a huge bank account that just sits there not benefiting anyone other than ourselves.

By the way, for those of us who can sit and think, “Well, I’m not wealthy, so this doesn’t apply to me, Jesus wasn’t talking to me” sorry, but this is one of those places where our spiritual cataracts can cloud our vision. We may not be wealthy. I seriously doubt if I will be sitting down in this congregation with any billionaires, but no matter how much or how little we think we have, when we compare ourselves to the rest of the world, we are all wealthy by comparison.

Paul’s letter to Timothy, and Jesus’ parable in Luke’s gospel are about far more than material wealth. While they both speak of money and material wealth, I believe they are quite simply about not missing what really matters most. They are about paying attention to God, about keeping our eyes, ears, hearts, minds, and spirits open to God and putting God first. When we do that, then all of the other good and wonderful things in life fall into place and really can become the blessings that God intends for them to be.

Paul urges us to seize *real life* and <sup>ii</sup>contrasts that with destructive life. For Paul, destructive life is the pursuit of riches of any kind – putting anything before God. He refers not only to the damage that it does to those who focus only on pursuing riches but also the damage to those whose lives are destroyed by their pursuit.

We might ask ourselves how we decide how much of our resources to spend on ourselves and how much to use to meet human need. We might reflect upon how a fuller trust in God would free us up to give and share more. We could think about which is the stronger motivation for generosity – fear of judgement or love of God and neighbor.

Wealth and power are unreliable objects of faith because they can easily disappear and they provide little hope in the face of death. In contrast, generosity and good works affirm real life, because they arise out of faith. Eternal life is not something we look forward to and work for. It is something that has come because Christ has come and brought eternity into our midst. “The reality of God’s life-giving presence establishes itself in this era and shapes the human perspective on life and on the materials of this world: things are passing, we are not.” “By God life was given, is being given, and will be given.” Choose real life!

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<sup>i</sup> Wikipedia – prosperity theology

<sup>ii</sup> Feasting on the Word