A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

 “*Taking Hold of the Real Life*”

Luke 16.19-31

September 29, 2019

They say you shouldn’t talk about money in church, but the scriptures for today are all about wealth and poverty. So here we are, talking about relationships, justice, mercy, and the line between rich and poor. If there’s one thing most people can agree about its which side of that line they’d prefer to be on. We’re a culture practically built on the notion of building wealth, fueled by the pursuit of riches. But the scripture isn’t so sure we have it right or at least that it’s that simple.

Today we have a parable from Jesus, a warning from prophet Amos, a psalm of praise for God’s concern for the suffering, an instruction from the New Testament epistle . . .these all about wealth and poverty. These aren’t unique of course. You could open the Bible to just about any page and find a word from God about wealth and poverty. Most of them, like these, tend to shake things up.

Jesus tells a shocking parable. The parable begins with a cartoonish picture of obscene wealth and a shocking picture of abject poverty in close proximity to one another. In life, a rich man wore silk pajamas, ate cheesecake for breakfast, and lived in a house surrounded by an elaborate gate to keep the riff-raff at a distance. Among the riff-raff was a very poor man who laid at his gate, begged for the crumbs that fell from the rich man’s table, and whose only health care plan were stray dogs who liked his sores. Yet, as all do eventually no matter their station in life, both men, the rich and poor, die.

Upon his death, the poor man, Lazarus, is carried by angels to Abraham’s side, a picture of heavenly comfort. The rich man, however, finds himself in Hades, in torment, in anguish in the flame of eternal suffering. The one who suffered is now comforted; the one who lived in comfort now suffers. They’ve changed places. The rich man sees the poor man and calls out to Abraham to send him to “dip your finger in the water and let a drop of it cool my tongue, for I am in torment in this flame.” But this is impossible. A great chasm has been fixed between the two of them that cannot be crossed.

The uncrossable chasm shocks the listener. In Greek, a *chasma*: A wide, deep gulf, a grand, awful canyon. This is the only time in the Bible when this word is used but it’s one of the most memorable, harrowing words among all the words and warnings of scripture. A chasm that cannot be crossed. A fixed fate. The one who suffered in this life is comforted in the next. The one who lived in ease in this life is in agony in the next.

The eternal chasm is supposed to shock the listener, and it does. But the story hangs on whether the earthly chasm shocks us just as much. The chasm was already there between them; it’s only a matter of who is on which side. It’s too late for the rich man, but he asks that Abraham would send word to his brothers still alive to warn them; Warn them, he begs. But warn them about what?

Our other scripture readings this morning point toward an answer, but it’s not an answer many want to hear. While we are shocked by the chasm of eternal torment in the afterlife, our other texts this morning like much of the Old and New Testaments express God’s grave concern about the chasms that exist here on earth, in this life, especially the wide yawing gap between rich and poor, haves and have nots, the canyons between those living in mansions on easy street and those lying in the gutter.

No matter what economic theory governs a society, some people will have more wealth than others. This of itself is not evil, but wealth is both a blessing and a spiritually tricky thing because wealth rarely is built through pure virtue. In an industrial age, anything we consume, from our food to our clothes is part of a complex web of often problematic production and consumption processes. We’re all complicit. Therefore, we must be mindful, repentant, and willing to change the ways our lives benefit by abuse of the earth’s resources and toward those underpaid for their labor. Everything is soaking with compromise, violence, greed, lust, selfishness. We’re all complicit whether we’re aware of it or not. That’s the world we live in. What is especially, egregiously evil is building a fortune directly by increasing the misery of others. The prophet Amos severely warns those who not only are rich, but are also deaf to the cry of the poor, and even profit from the misery of the poor. This is a cruel form of economic and social injustice, to build personal wealth directly in proportion to the suffering inflicted on other people.

There’s a special kind of woe for those who willfully and intentionally profit by causing the suffering of others. It’s dangerous to throw stones at the way people are trying to make a living; we’re all complicit in countless ways in a fallen economy and society. Yet Amos’ warning still rings out, “Woe to those who are at ease in Zion, to those who feel secure on the mountain of Samaria, woe to those who eat lambs from the flock, calves from the stall, who drink wine from bowls, anoint themselves with fine oils, and are not grieved over the ruin of the people.”

To be grieved over the ruin of the people is to be shaken from your complacency and driven to change not only your life but the lives of those around you who are suffering. We begin to see how God calls us to lives intertwined with our neighbors in love. In God’s community, there’s no room for just looking out for number one. We look out for numbers 1-100... We’re bound together.

1 Timothy paints a New Testament picture of such a Christian life. It’s not just about having right ideas about God, but about living generously with one another:

“We brought nothing into the world, so we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from their faith and pierced themselves with many pains.”

“But you, person of God, shun all this: pursue righteous, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness . . .As for those who in this present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.”

Here there’s a suspicion about the spiritual dangers of riches, but there’s also a calling placed on those with means. “They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may *take hold of the life that really is life*.”

The life that really is life. That’s what the rich man had completely missed. What he had missed was that life is not made by his food, his table, his clothes, or his house. Life that really is life is love of your neighbor. That’s called church. The epistle sets out a sacred vision ignored by the complacent people in Amos and the rich man in the parable: openhanded, embracing, hospitable, compassionate, joy-filled, life-giving life. Live that life and you’re living your best life. You’re living God’s life which is an ever-flowing fountain of loving, life-giving creation.

Now, you may not be rich, anything like rich. So maybe this has nothing to do with you. Most people I know aren’t anything approaching rich. Rich people live somewhere else. Most people I know, they’re just trying to put some food on the table, pay the monthly bills, and try to save something for their kids to go to college someday, and retirement, whatever that is, would be nice too. Remember that life that really is life isn’t up there at the top of the ladder, it’s how you live with those below you a few rungs.

Still, at the table of our Lord there are no rungs, there is no ladder, there are no gradients of people. There is no gate, and no one has to beg for a few crumbs. In Christ, all are invited to feast, not from the crumbs but to feast at the table where there is plenty for all.

Most people I know may not consider themselves rich and may not really know anyone truly poor. So, in that way, they’re off the hook, but then again, that’s what the rich man thought about himself in Jesus’ parable. He didn’t do anything decidedly wicked; he was just blind. He was just deaf. He just didn’t see what was right at his own gate. Living for himself, cut off from God and from his neighbor, isolated, insulated, and alone, he didn’t hear the cries of someone right in front of him. He didn’t want to see. He didn’t want to hear.

But God sees and wants us to see; God hears and wants us to hear; and God has good news for the poor in the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is also good news for the rich and everyone in between. God wants our lives not to be marked by the insulating distance we manufacture between us and others but by our shared lives with our brothers and sisters. We worship a God of limitless abundance. Thousands can be fed from a single loaf of shared bread broken. Countless numbers can live by the death of one man whose body is broken and crucified for us. In the reign of God, the divisions that impoverish all our lives are broken down by the invitation to the Table of abundant, inexhaustible grace. What we receive here is the beginning of how all can live in the fullness of life in this life and the next . . .a shared meal, a shared calling, a shared earth, a shared life of blessing and invitation for all God’s children in the name of Jesus Christ.

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