

“Two Stories about Us”
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We have looked at six parables so far this summer. I hope you’ve found something in the retellings that resonated with you. Maybe you’ve even found yourself wondering about one of them later in the week. Today we consider two parables in which Jesus talks about wealth. We’ve been conditioned since OT times to believe, as the Book of Proverbs says, that “Riches are a sign of God’s blessing.” Yet, Jesus’ parables offer a very different understanding of the wealthy and their lives. One insight is that people don’t possess wealth so much as it possesses them. Here is an adaptation of Clarence Jordon’s take on our first lesson:

One day someone shouted to Jesus from the crowd: “Hey, how about making my brother divide up the inheritance with me?!” Jesus turned around and said, “Who made me the referee of financial squabbles?” Then he added, “You need to stay on your guard against all kinds of greediness. Life isn’t about having lots of stuff!” Then he told them a story. Today, it might have sounded like this:

The lands of a certain rich man produced great crops – corn, soybeans, you name it. He and his spouse had bought the land when they were young and they had worked hard through the years. They spent long days cultivating and working the land, trying to raise big crops that would pay the mortgage, put the kids through school and basically keep everything afloat.

Sometimes in the evening, the two of them would walk up the hill behind the house and watch the sunset. Beautiful... They’d agree that it sure was pretty!

They also found time to go canoeing with the kids and teach them to recognize the different birdcalls. At night, they’d take turns reading aloud *Winnie the Pooh*, or the *Harry Potter* or *How to Train Your Dragon* series.

As time went on though, such moments became rarer. County agents, farm implement salespeople and such were promoting all the ways they would get bigger and better. Gradually, machines began to dominate their lives. But they didn’t worry. After all, the farm was more productive. There was barely any room to store everything. Their bank account swelled.

They heard about people far away and even nearby who didn’t have enough to eat but they figured that was their own fault. They weren’t willing to work like these two had.

Finally, one day, the couple looked over their auditor’s report and tax returns. Things were going well and they were pleased. “You know,” she said to him, “We have enough to live it up for the rest of our days. Let’s transfer the property to the kids and move to Arizona.”

Now, picture God in a “voice over” saying, “You fools. This very night, all these things are possessing your being. You don’t own them – they own you. All your stuff – everything you’ve socked away – what is it, really?”

So the two farmers came to realize that they were in bondage to all the things that had enslaved them all along. *Luke 12:13-21*

Usually, we hear that the farmer in the story is going to die. God or fate or something is demanding his soul. But... those people who actually study Greek tell us this is not what the text says. Instead of “... your soul is being demanded of you,” it’s, “This night, they require your soul” – referring to all the stuff that the two had thought they owned.

While our soul, our being, is supposed to belong to God, too often it actually belongs to whatever else we fill our lives with. What we believe we possess dictates what we have to do to secure and maintain it.

You have a vehicle (or two or three) so you need gas, tires, tune-ups, wipers and oil changes. If you want it to look nice, there’s the carwash with wax plus upholstery cleaning. All of this also takes time and money. You have a home, so you need furniture, beds, a stove, cabinets, sheets, pillows, paint, cleaning supplies. If you have a yard, you need to mow and maintain that as well. Then there’s the boat, the camper, the cabin, the time-share...

Again from Luke's gospel account:

There was a rich man, let's call him Mr. Jones, who dressed well and hosted big doings every day. Outside his gate was Lazarus, begging, and covered in sores. Lazarus would have loved to eat the other man's table scraps. Besides this, dogs came and licked his sores.

Here is another one of those Trojan horse parables I mentioned a few weeks ago. Jesus is hiding truth in a story, hoping people will let it in before they realize that inside this made-up story is a truth they need to face. In the Greek, there's a play on words. *Beggar* and *spit* are related words. Spit showed contempt but was also thought to have healing properties. Remember when Jesus made a salve out of spit and dirt and rubbed it on someone's blind eyes?

Lazarus was a spit-upon person. Mr. Jones, with his fine house, rich clothes, food and friends was contemptuous of him. Interestingly, though, the dogs used their spit to cleanse his wounds. To heal, showing more caring than one of God's chosen people. The dogs, representing outsiders, did something simply because it needed to be done. The rich man, with his sense of entitlement, was fine with doing nothing.

Now, the poor man died and was carried off to sit next to Abraham, the founder – if you will – of the Jewish faith. Mr. Jones died, too, but he ended up tormented in the hereafter.

We've heard before that Jesus was constantly turning beliefs and opinions upside-down. That's what is meant by "The last will be first and the first will be last." Jesus came to upend our assumptions that keep us believing we have an in with God and that we can ignore others.

Lazarus was sitting pretty up there with Abraham when Mr. Jones looked up and saw them.

'Abraham, take pity on me. Send Lazarus with some water. I'm parched. I'm scorching!'

But Abraham said, 'Isn't this funny. You had every good thing while you were alive and Lazarus got leftovers and hand-me-downs. Do you remember that? Now it's reversed.

Lazarus is my guest of honor and you're the one suffering. Besides that, a huge chasm exists between you and us. We couldn't reach you even if we wanted to.'

There's a chasm between us. Google dictionary defines *chasm* as "a deep fissure, a gorge, abyss, canyon, ravine, gulf..." Abraham and the others can't get to Mr. Jones because they're on one side of the Grand Canyon and he's on the other. How do you suppose it got there? Who dug it? Not God. Not Abraham. Not Lazarus. Once wealthy Mr. Jones looks up and knows that he dug it.

Google's other definition for *chasm* is "a profound difference between people, viewpoints, feelings, [and such]." This chasm, this difference, isn't created by the people who are poor or hungry or who live on the other side of some human-made national border. This chasm is made and cultivated by the Joneses, McIntoshes, and all of us so that we can keep people like Lazarus out. We don't want our property values to fall. We don't want *them* in our neighborhoods or schools. Of course, the problem is that someday you may find that you need to cross that gulf yourself. It's like burning your bridges behind you and then realizing you need to cross one of them again.

The rich man said, 'Please, send Lazarus to warn my brothers so they don't end up like me!'

Abraham answered, 'They have their bibles. They have preachers. They can listen to them.'

'But they won't! I know! I was just like them. But if someone from the dead goes to them, they'll change their ways.'

Abraham said, 'If they won't listen to the bible and preachers, they won't be persuaded even if someone visits them from the dead.'

Luke 16:19-31

We're used to having gulfs between ourselves and others. We've been living with them all our lives – gulfs of skin color, of wealth and prosperity, of gender and sexuality, of social position or nationality. Lucas is a red-headed all-American guy. He has a wife and little girl. He didn't dig any gorges and didn't believe he'd benefited from them until he attend a workshop in the Twin Cities. I won't go into the details but after a day and a half of training, it hit him that even without knowing it, he'd been part of the chasm support system. If you were born a white U.S. citizen, and were educated, the chasms are there already. Hearing Jesus' call, you need to ask yourself: *What am I doing to fill in that chasm? How am I working to dismantle the boundaries that keep other people shut out of our fellowship?*

Jesus tells these stories not to promote boundaries but to get us to notice them because it's only after we admit they're there that we can begin the work of filling them in. Only after we admit

the truth can we have the motivation to build bridges. And bridge-building is the purpose of Jesus' story.

We can't wait and hope for someone else to do it. The folks on the other side of the abyss cannot do it. Only we can build these bridges. The burden is on us. We need to set aside our sense of entitlement or privilege (even if we never claimed it or wanted it) and we need to find ways to embrace our sisters and brothers everywhere as siblings. We need to do this for their sake, yes. But we also need to do it for our own. As much as others may be, we also are victims of the barriers that we, and others before us, have erected. We shut ourselves away from a large part of God's family – never realizing that “those on the bottom will be on top and those on top will be on the bottom.” Even if we don't have much we're victims of our own affluence, of all our *stuff* that owns us more than we ever owned it.

These parables are for us.

Amen.