

Taking It With You

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When I was a kid we went to church in Rockville Center, an old and well-to-do suburb on Long Island. The pastor was a gifted preacher, Roy Brennan. I still remember some of his sermons. Since we moved churches when I was 9, that's saying something.

Dr. Brennan liked to have fun at the congregation's expense. He loved us, but maybe not everything about us.

I can remember him looking out on his well-dressed legions—this was in the early 60s, and everybody went to church—and he'd say, tongue in cheek: "You know, you can't take it with you... and if you did, it would burn!"

Our rich friend in today's parable has that problem. He dies, ends up in Hades, the place of the dead, and finds that the comforts and luxuries of his life are no more.

More than that, he finds himself in agony in the flames. And a man who used to feast sumptuously every day is now yearning for a drop of water to cool his tongue.

And in his agony, we see that he has brought something with him into death. He's brought his sense of entitlement. He's brought his attitude with him. He's brought privilege; and even though he now has nothing, that sense of entitlement is still as strong within him as it ever was while he was alive.

He looks up and sees Lazarus of all people, a man he pretended to ignore all his life, but whose name he knows, resting in the bosom of Abraham and he says, "Father Abraham! Have mercy on me! And send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue..."

Abraham responds to him, and acknowledges the relationship between them with as much love as he can muster. Father Abraham calls him *teknon*, child, my child, and he says, first, that this arrangement so troubling to the formerly rich man is perfectly fair, and second, that there is a big chasm, a deep crevice or a canyon, some physical impediment in between them that can't be crossed.

So even though they can see each other, they can't go to each other, can't reach out to each other, can't help each other.

Abraham seems to know that there are some who would wish to cross over from the place of comfort to the place of torment. He says that is why the chasm is there. He seems to know, in this parable, that those now resting in comfort and ease might well feel empathy to those who ignored them in life but now suffer as they once suffered. In fact, he says

that's why the chasm is there, to keep the Lazaruses of the afterlife from continuing to serve the once-rich and powerful.

You see, the parable says, they too, bring something with them: their acceptance of their place in the social structure of the day—a day that, for them, has now come and gone.

Jesus has a few points to make with this parable. A few points we need to take with us from this tale of the rich man and Lazarus.

First, be careful about being rich.

Jesus never says in Luke that you can't be rich and be faithful to God, he just says that it is very, very difficult.

He says, "Watch out, those of you who are rich now, for then you will be poor." He says, "So it is for those who are not rich towards God."

"It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle," he says, "than for a rich person to be part of God's kingdom," and when the crowd objects, as obsessed with the trappings of wealth and status as we are today, saying, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus says, hold on, chill out, with God all things can happen.

Preachers of what's called the "prosperity Gospel" must avoid Luke like the plague. In fact, I'm not sure what Gospel they do read...

Jesus doesn't dislike the rich, he's not some proto-Marxist in sandals; he loves the wealthy, eats with them, hangs out with them. He just thinks that being rich, being wealthy enough to be able to isolate yourself from God and the people, puts the wealthy in a deathly predicament.

John Wesley echoes that same point, when he preaches, "It is no more sinful to be rich than to be poor. But it is dangerous beyond expression."

As he writes in his sermon "The Danger of Riches, a sermon preached at a time when his annual income was many times what he needed to get by,

My friends, let you that are rich be even as I am. Do you that possess more than food, clothing and shelter ask: What shall we do with the leftover? Shall we throw into the sea what God has given us? God forbid that you should! Money is an excellent talent: it may be employed much to the glory of God. I do not say give away a tenth of all you possess, I do not say give a fifth of your substance, I dare not advise you to give half of what you have; no, nor three quarters—but all! Lift up your hearts and you will see clearly in what spirit this is to be done.

Wesley was once hit by an inquiry from the English tax commissioners (the British equivalent of the IRS), who couldn't understand how someone with his income could own nothing. "Surely you have some silver plate in your house that you have neglected to pay excise tax on," they wrote in 1776.

He responded, “I have two silver spoons at London and two at Bristol. This is all the plate I have at present, and I shall not buy any more while so many round me want bread.”

Wesley’s point was the same as Jesus’: wealth can hurt the wealthy, by eating away at empathy and compassion and humility and even patience and happiness.

Of course, before we begin to feel smug, we should recognize that from the perspective of Jesus, to say nothing of the perspective of our global economy, we are all among the rich. Be careful of being rich.

The second point Jesus makes in this parable is this: our social structures are not created or blessed by God.

We pride ourselves on living in a land where opportunity has replaced social class. There is some truth to that. But was there ever a society more focused on the trappings of economic class? At the same time, we’re in denial about that. We have a persistent illusion that we’re all in the same boat: “a rising tide lifts all boats” we used to say, ignoring the rather obvious fact that some are in yachts and some in lifeboats, and some are still in the bay, where the rising tide only makes it harder for them to keep their heads above water.

In his new book, *Are the Rich Necessary?* Hunter Lewis answers, both yes and no. There are functions the rich perform in our economy: they save and invest, simply because there is a limit to how much anyone can spend. They innovate and create, some of them, and so should be rewarded. Many of the wealthy are very generous.

On the other hand, he writes, many of those who are financially wealthy live from the work of others, adding little to our well-being. In many cases the rich become rich at the expense of the poor. And the fact that some in our society are absurdly wealthy while others are desperately poor raises a specter of unfairness that eats away at our national self-identity as a fair and egalitarian society.

Jesus sees the social structure of his day as being an obstacle to God’s kingdom. Before his birth, Luke quotes the mother of Jesus as singing, “God has brought down the powerful from their chairs, and lifted up the lowly,” (shades of Lazarus) and “He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty,” (shades of the rich man.)

Not only is our social structure not blessed by God, but according to Luke’s take on the gospel, at least; God would love to shake it up, turn it around, turn it upside down.

Third and final point that Jesus is making with this parable: The chasm he describes between Lazarus and the rich man does not exist in this life, although we think it does.

Lazarus and the rich man were separated only by attitude. There was nothing that prevented the rich man from reaching out to Lazarus. We find out later that the rich man even knows his name. Would it have been so difficult to get up from the table once in a while and go look and see what was happening by the gate of his estate? Would it have disturbed him so much to ask his doorman to let him upstairs?

Well, there may not be a physical chasm separating people of different economic classes and situations from each other, but a whole array of invisible barriers and unexamined assumptions keep us apart.

That may not ever change in our society. But there is one place in the middle of society that a different reality can come about.

I'm not naïve about the church. There are plenty of churches around that reinforce the separation between rich and poor. And plenty of people are happy to have it that way. The wealthy are happy to be with people similarly situated. The poor are happy to be in places where they can have status and responsibilities that may elude them in the rest of their lives.

They say that economic status is a bigger issue within churches than more obvious dividers like race and age.

That's the reality, the sad reality. But it doesn't have to be that way. The church was birthed in an assumption that all people of whatever race or status or class or level of education or ethnic background are exactly equal in the sight of God, and need to be equal in the sight of God's people.

When the church is true to the vision of its homeless founder, that has never been a problem.

When the church is true to the vision of its founder, rich and poor sit together at table. Like First Church, Jerusalem, in which Luke tells us in Acts chapter 2, nobody said that what they had was theirs, but gave to all as any had need.

When the church is true to the vision of its founder, all meet together at the throne of grace, each of us painfully and profoundly aware of our inadequacy before God. Each of us passionately aware of the love God has for us.

I love the way this building here is filled every day and every night with the people of God. How powerful a witness it would be for the kingdom to keep mixing it up: being a place where rich and poor come together and eat together and sing together and study together and play together and work together.

That's the kind of church I want. That's the kind of church I long for.

Where all of us will be welcomed joyfully by each of us, just as all of us will be welcomed one day into the bosom of Abraham.