

Greediness vs. Godliness

A sermon preached by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,
on Sunday, September 25, 2022.

1 Timothy 6:6-19
Luke 16:19-31

Both of our scripture readings this morning offer warnings about the dangers of wealth. In Luke, a rich man goes to hell and a poor man goes to heaven. And in the First Letter to Timothy – we find the famous and often misquoted passage: “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.”

Like it or not, issues of wealth, poverty, and economic justice hold a central place in the Bible. These issues are found all through the Hebrew prophets. And Jesus talks more about wealth and poverty than almost any other issue. There’s no getting around it. If we tried to cut out all the references to the rich and the poor in the Bible, our scriptures would be left in tatters.

In First Timothy, Paul (or whoever is writing in Paul’s name) is warning against false teachers who see “godliness as a means of gain,” those who teach that practicing the Christian faith will bring financial success. You know the type: popular televangelists with their multimillion-dollar mansions and private jets who preach the prosperity gospel that wealth is God’s reward to the faithful. All you have to do to become prosperous, they say, is have faith in God, and God will reward you with bountiful blessings.

The author of First Timothy acknowledges that godliness is beneficial but not in the materialistic way that the false teachers claim. “There is great gain in godliness combined with contentment;” he writes, “for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these.”

It then goes on to warn that “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.” (Think of gambling addicts, embezzlers, drug dealers, human traffickers.) “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil,” the passage continues, “and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.”

This is the passage from which comes the popular saying “money is the root of all evil.” But notice the difference. The original wording is not about money itself, but “the love of money,” the desire to be wealthy – never being satisfied with what one has, always wanting more. The letter counsels us to be content with having our basic needs met: “if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these.”

Someone once said that “there are two ways to be rich: make more or desire less.” The letter to Timothy encourages the latter course. As the ancient Roman, Cicero, wrote, a century before Jesus: “To be content with what one has is the greatest and truest of riches.”

In Luke, Jesus tells us about a rich man who was rather conspicuous in his consumption. He dressed in purple (the color of royalty). He wore clothes made of fine linen. He ate lavish meals every day. And he lived in a gated community – or at least we know that his home was gated – presumably to give him privacy and security, to separate himself from the riffraff of the city.

Outside his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, “who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table.” Lazarus was also ill. His body was covered with sores, which the dogs would come and lick. There is no interaction between the rich man and Lazarus. They don’t speak to each other. They appear to live completely separate lives, divided by a table and a gate.

As the story continues, Lazarus dies at the rich man's gate and is "carried away by angels to be with Abraham," which was regarded as the place of highest bliss. The rich man also dies, and ends up in Hades, where he is tormented.

We might wonder what the rich man did wrong to warrant being tormented in the afterlife. He is not depicted in the text as an evil person. There is no mention of his mistreating Lazarus or refusing him food. The rich man doesn't advocate for legislation that would prohibit poor people like Lazarus from camping out at his gate. The rich man doesn't appear to hold any disdain for Lazarus. He just doesn't notice him—or pretends not to. It was as if Lazarus was invisible to the rich man.

John Donahue, a Jesuit priest and New Testament scholar, says the problem is that the rich never "see" the poor. "One of the prime dangers of wealth is that it causes blindness."

I must confess that I feel convicted by Donahue's observation. Driving around Albuquerque, how many times a day have I pulled up to a stop light and ignored the poor panhandler on the median, pretending not to see them.

Had the rich man noticed Lazarus and reached out to him in this life, the story might have ended very differently. Had the rich man seen Lazarus as a human being, made eye contact with him, spoken with him, the separation between them might have begun to be bridged. Had the rich man learned of Lazarus' needs, he might have tried to help him with food, shelter, health care. The great chasm between the rich man and Lazarus in this life was bridgeable. By the time they had both died, it was too late.

Many of us may find it difficult to identify with the rich man with all his wealth or with poor Lazarus -- hungry, ill, and unhoused. If we don't identify with either main character, then maybe we will find it easier to relate to the rich man's five brothers.

The rich man, realizing that he was doomed, called out to Abraham and begged him to warn his five brothers so that they

would not make the same mistake he did and end up in the same place of torment. But Abraham refused, saying that “they have Moses and the prophets;” and “should listen to them.” “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead,” Abraham says.

Like the five brothers, we, too, have Moses and the prophets. Will we listen to them? Or will we turn a deaf ear to their message of social and economic justice? What’s more, we also have what the rich man asked for – someone who has risen from the dead. Not Lazarus, but Jesus Christ. Is the risen Christ enough to convince us to be generous with the resources God entrusts to our care, to share what we have with others who are in need? Or are we doomed to repeat the rich man’s folly of ignoring the Lazaruses of this world -- to our own detriment?

First Timothy offers some helpful counsel here: “As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. 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.”

Many churches, St. Andrew included, are devoted to God and excel at doing good works, being generous, and sharing with those in need. We are really good at works of mercy – the actions that are listed in chapter 25 of Matthew’s gospel: feeding the hungry, giving the thirsty something to drink, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, visiting the imprisoned. These are acts of charity, providing direct services to individuals to meet their immediate needs. We do this through our “Socks and Sandwiches” Neighborhood Friend Ministry, through our partnerships with Governor Bent Elementary School, FaithWorks, Hopeworks, Family Promise, the Rio Grande Food Project, and through our support of other community organizations.

A few years ago, St. Andrew also took the bold step of accepting our denomination's invitation to become a Matthew 25 Church. One of the goals we committed to is "eradicating systemic poverty." That entails going well beyond acts of charity. It involves doing justice, which is much more challenging. It means bridging the great chasm between the rich and the poor by addressing the root causes of income and wealth inequality. It means engaging in public policy advocacy and other collective action to change the underlying structures in our society that allow the rich to get richer while the poor get poorer. I'd like to see our congregation be as involved in doing justice through public policy advocacy as we are in helping people through acts of charity. It's the only way we can bring about the lasting, structural changes required to eradicate systemic poverty.

St. Andrew is an "advocating congregation" with Lutheran Advocacy Ministry in New Mexico, which works through the legislature every year to address hunger and poverty in our state. Those advocacy efforts helped to win a gradual increase in New Mexico's minimum wage from \$7.50/hour in 2019 to \$12/hour beginning next year. Those advocacy efforts also passed legislation earlier this year that caps interest rates on loans to 36%. Predatory lending rates in our state had been as high as 175%. These new laws are making a difference in the lives of many low-wage workers and their families.

We need to continue working for social change to the point that we no longer need to make sandwiches and casseroles, because there are no more hungry people. We need to continue engaging in public policy advocacy to the point at which HopeWorks and FaithWorks can close their doors, because all people finally have housing.

First Timothy calls us to a simpler, less materialistic lifestyle – to be content when our basic needs are met. It's a countercultural message, to be sure. Instead of longing for a bigger house or a better car or a newer computer, we are urged to "pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness."

And Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus compels us to open our eyes to see the poor in our midst and not turn away, to share what we have with them, to help meet their need.

So, may we find contentment in simpler lives, joy in generous sharing, and fulfillment in doing justice, speeding the day when the basic human needs of all people will finally be satisfied. May it be so. Amen.