

“THE POOR YOU WILL ALWAYS HAVE WITH YOU...”

Luke 16:19-31

Preached by Dr. Cahill

Babcock Presbyterian Church

Sunday, September 29, 2013

Last Sunday’s sermon was based on the parable of the Dishonest Steward which is very hard to understand until you carefully deconstruct it to uncover its true meaning. In this case, Jesus held up the Dishonest Steward who was either incompetent, an embezzler, or both, as a role model for Christian discipleship. Why? Not because he dishonestly wheeled and dealt his way to success but because he was both committed and creative in setting and keeping his goals to come out on top. Never mind he was as crooked as a dog’s hind leg, just focus on how his insecurity made him bold and creative. That was Jesus’ point: he wants his disciples to experience that same brand of creative insecurity the next time we find ourselves wondering how to accomplish something big and important for the greater good and God’s glory.

If that parable last Sunday seemed confusing and contradictory, today’s parable is uncomfortably blunt so it should make us sweat and squirm.

We’re told there was a rich man, unnamed, who always dressed to the nines and feasted sumptuously every day. In the meantime, just outside his gated community there was a starving poor man named Lazarus who suffered from a painful skin infection. When both died they suddenly experienced a role reversal. Now Lazarus was healthy and well fed in heaven and the rich man was tormented in Hades. Compounding his torment, he could see from afar Lazarus with Abraham. The rich man cried out, “Father Abraham, have mercy on me, send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger to cool my tongue for I am in agony in these flames.”

Abraham called back, reminding him how he lived in luxury, and now it was Lazarus’ turn. What’s more the rich man was told the great chasm between heaven and hell made any crossovers in either direction impassable.

The rich man, resigned to his fate, then begged Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers so they could repent. Again his request was denied because his brothers already knew everything Moses and the prophets taught about their communal obligations, and if the brothers refused to hear them, why would they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead?

What are we to make of this parable? First, how we live in this world determines how we’ll live in the next. I think only the smuggest and self-righteous religious types would get any delight in the thought of eternal punishment for sinners and unbelievers while the rest of us, saints and sinners alike, would rather believe that ultimately God will relent, proclaim universal salvation and close hell down for good.

However we can't deny Jesus spoke about the reality of eternal punishment often enough to make us realize we're just whistling passed the grave yard if we try to pretend what Jesus taught ain't necessarily so. Instead it's in our best interest to acknowledge the trajectory we choose and stick to in this life will continue into eternity.

One more thing: even though Christ warned us about eternal punishment, that shouldn't be our motivating factor to live according to the Sermon on the Mount. God doesn't want us to choose the right way out of fear but out of love. That's true in human relationships, we do things for the people we love not because we're afraid of them but because they love us, it's equally true in our relationship with God. We can love God, each other and ourselves because God loved us first.

Then how do we explain the outcome of today's Gospel? Is it only because the rich man was too successful for his own good while the poor man, who may have never done an honest day's work, ended up in heaven just because he was poor? Where's the justice in that?

Here's where it's helpful to reconsider last Sunday's sermon on the Dishonest Steward. Material success and living large in itself isn't sinful, if your wealth comes honestly, and how you spend your money generously. It's a question of faithful and honest stewardship, keeping enough for yourself, but also giving enough away to worthy causes and charities that enhance other people's quality of life.

What's more, how we spend our money, and ourselves, shouldn't be limited by that selfish prayer, "Bless me and my wife, my son John and his wife, us four no more. Amen," but enhanced by the more expansive prayer, "Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me."

Another thing: just as we're on thin ice if we say, "God hates the rich because they're rich," it's equally wrong to say God loves the poor just because they're poor. There are many rich people who are kind, loving and generous and there are plenty of poor people who are not. So just being poor doesn't give you a free pass into heaven. Instead God loves the poor not because they're good but because they're deprived of a quality of life all God's children were created to enjoy.

This is true, many are poor not because they're lazy, but because they're trapped in a cycle of poverty from one generation to the next. Given a chance to break the cycle many take it, but they need outside help, people to reach out, take them by the hand and show them the way. We are our brother's keeper and anyone in need is our neighbor. That's what Jesus taught.

The rich man ended up in hell, not just because he was rich but because he ignored Moses and the prophets. One of the teachings of Moses and the prophets the rich man ignored comes from Deuteronomy, attributed to Moses and quoted by Jesus. You're probably familiar with the first half of the verse, I'm sure: "The poor will always

be with you,” but it didn’t end there, here’s the rest of it, “I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.’” (Deuteronomy 15:1)

Many people take, “The poor will always be with you,” as a truism meant to be taken fatalistically, that is there’s nothing anybody can do about it, so just accept it. This was probably the rich man’s rationalization granting himself permission to step over Lazarus whenever he passed through the gate to his house. As far as he was concerned Lazarus, though starving and suffering, was just an unfortunate fixture, part of the landscape, someone to be ignored and endured. Mind you, the rich man did nothing to hurt Lazarus like call the police and have him forcibly removed, he just pretended Lazarus didn’t exist, and that was his unforgiveable sin.

I think this is true, most of us get fixated over the things we have done, but shouldn’t have done and the things we didn’t do but should’ve done because we broke the rules we’ve been taught to keep, generating God’s displeasure and our self-hatred for giving into temptation. Even in guilt it’s “all about me, and how my guilt deprives me of inner peace and joy.” That’s all well and good as long as we also prayerfully consider the ramifications of our sinful behavior on others. Yes, our sinful actions and inactions harm ourselves, but our sins also harm others, and that I believe is the point of this parable. Being intentionally oblivious to human needs adds to the suffering in the world.

We often dismiss the Old Testament books like Deuteronomy that list all the laws of Moses. We even poke fun at those laws we find irrelevant like not eating shell fish, which if you live here in Baltimore seems almost sacrilegious. But the bulk of these laws were actually helpful guidelines for living together in community as God’s people which still apply today. Many of these laws centered on the community’s responsibilities towards widows, orphans, the disabled and the poor but when the community, especially the wealthy and powerful, ignored these responsibilities, that’s when God raised up the prophets, like Amos, to remind the well-to-do their God-given obligations to, as Jesus put it, feed the hungry, clothe the naked and visit the sick.

I know from my conversations with many of you that you do care for the poor, especially the ones you see begging at the cross roads. You’re also frustrated because you’re afraid the money you give will go for drugs or alcohol and not for food and clothing. I myself have been suckered more than once giving money to con men.

All the more reason to find productive ways to minister to the poor like donating money to soup kitchens and other charities or volunteering your time at places like the Towson Assistance Center. I know, your day jobs limit your ability to volunteer, but isn’t God telling you to do something for someone who can never pay you back?

At this time your session is exploring several tangible ways for us to do something together. One has already been thought out and communicated to you, the other is in the very early stages of being explored. One involves a ministry far away, the other is close to home. One involves giving money, the other involves giving time, both precious commodities that involve sacrifice.

You already know about Howard and Lois Muthungu's commitment to SOS, a faith based orphanage in Nairobi, Kenya. They support two orphans a year at the cost of \$1,000.00 each. Howard and Lois recently returned from a three week visit to see family and friends back home, and also visited the orphanage to deliver a \$2,000.00 check from Babcock. The letter from SOS thanking us is in a bulletin insert. The Outreach Team is proposing everyone at Babcock follow the example of Howard and Lois by supporting an orphan for a year. We realize not everyone can give \$1,000.00 apiece but maybe two or three families or individuals can combine together to support a child. Please be in prayer about this, listening for what God wants you to do.

The other potential opportunity involves Habitat for Humanity. If and when the way be clear, you'll hear more about how we together can help several families in the city achieve home ownership through Baltimore Presbytery and maybe even our neighbors in the surrounding community.

Why should you be considering these things? Because after all, we are our brothers' keepers and everyone in need is our neighbor. Yes, the poor will always be with us, but so is Moses' command, "Open your hand to the poor and needy in your land."