

I

The Beatles may have sung, “Can’t Buy Me Love,” but you and I live and move and have our being in a world where money does just about everything else, don’t we? Conversations about money have dominated our national conversations in recent days as we have marked the one-year anniversary of the beginning of the pandemic and the signing of another relief bill aimed at alleviating some of the pandemic’s economic impact.

But even in “normal times,” money conversations are often at the front of our consciousness, both as a community and as individuals. In my line of work, I get to work with many couples who are preparing to enter into the covenant of Christian marriage, and we always spend some time talking about money and marriage, because the statistics tell us that one of the leading causes of divorce in America today is irreconcilable differences over issues of money.

We know that most of the time, those money fights are hardly ever really about the dollars themselves, but rather, what the dollars represent. Money can’t buy love, but it can provide a sense of security and a shared vision for a future. Money can’t buy love, but it’s a measure of value.

And because money conversations are really conversations about values, in the gospels, Jesus has more to say on the subject of money and

power and possessions and wealth than just about any other subject.

II

This winter and spring, we’ve been reading and preaching our way through the Gospel According to Luke. A few weeks ago, we read that Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem, where we know the cross and the tomb and the life beyond the tomb awaits his arrival. But as he makes his way to Jerusalem, Jesus is doing much preaching and teaching along the way, often through the use of parables – short stories that are meant to illustrate a deeper truth.

So listen now for a Word from God from Luke 16:19-31.

*“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is*

*comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’ He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house—for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”*

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

The unnamed rich man wears purple linen cloth, the color of royalty and high social rank. Lazarus, whose name ironically means “God helps,” is covered in sores. The unnamed rich man feasts scrumptiously. Lazarus lies at the rich man’s gate hoping for a few crumbs before the dogs get to them. The rich man is most likely invited to all the social gatherings and important places where the movers and shakers of the day do their moving and shaking. Lazarus, because of his skin condition, is ritually unclean, and therefore both unemployable and unwelcome in polite society.

That’s the setup of the parable. Note that up to this point in the story,

we don’t know if the rich man and Lazarus have had any interactions with each other. We know nothing about their respective moral characters. All we know is that they are on completely opposite ends of the wealth and power spectrum. That’s the setup of the parable.

And then comes the bite.

Both men die, but in the afterlife, their positions are completely reversed. Lazarus rests in the bosom of Abraham, the great patriarch of the people of God, while the rich man is tormented in Hades. Lazarus is now “on top,” so to speak, whereas the rich man is now “at the bottom.” And whereas a gate separated the two men in life, now a great chasm separates them in the afterlife.

And the unnamed rich man says, “Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the top of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in agony in these flames.”

And that’s the subtle tell. The unnamed rich man knew Lazarus’ name, both in life and in death. Lazarus had been a neighbor in need, not across the world, not across town, but right there at the gate to his own house. But even in death, even while he’s in agony, the rich man presumes that Lazarus should serve him.

The rich man’s sin wasn’t his riches. It was his failure to follow the instructions of Moses and the prophets – the very foundational Sunday School

ethics lessons that contain the biblical imperative to love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love your neighbor as you love yourself. In short, the reason that the rich man went from the top all the way to the bottom is that in life and in death, he failed at being a neighbor.

The reversal of fortunes of the two men in this parable is startling, and it's meant to be. It's a continuation of the theme of divine reversal that's been developing in Luke's gospel since the very first chapter of the gospel, when Mary first learned that she was pregnant with Jesus, and she sang "the poor will be lifted up, she sang, and the rich will be sent away empty."

It's a continuation of the theme of divine reversal found in Jesus' inaugural address in his hometown synagogue at Nazareth, when he proclaimed, – the poor, when he proclaimed, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

It's a continuation of the theme of divine reversal found in the Parable of The Good Samaritan – the one who was supposed to be hated and despised – the one who was supposed to be on the bottom – is the one who *was* a neighbor to the wounded man on the Jericho Road.

It's a continuation of the theme of divine reversal found in the Parable of the Prodigal Son – the one who ran off to the far country and came home with his tail between his legs smelling like a pig, at the end, is the one with a party and a ring and a robe.

And in this parable before us today, the radical reversal of fortunes between the rich man and Lazarus is just the latest incident Jesus turns our expectations about who is on top and who is on the bottom completely upside down.

The rich man's problem wasn't his money. There's nothing in the story to suggest rich man became rich by dishonest means. For all we know, he'd worked hard, he'd invested wisely, had some breaks go his way, and he'd built his wealth by the sweat of his brow. The rich man's problem was that he failed to see Lazarus as a neighbor and act accordingly, both in life and in death.

### III

My friend, God's love for you is beyond our human imagining. There is nothing that God wouldn't give for you, including God's one and only Son. God loves you completely, not because of your net worth, not because of your social standing, but simply because God is love. God loves you not because of anything you've said or not said, not because of anything you've done or not done, but because of what God has said and done for you in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

God loves you completely and unconditionally, my friend. But from the very beginning, God did not design you to live as an island unto yourself. You were made to live in community. You were made to live as a neighbor.

But the world in which you and I live and move and have our being wants us to draw tight lines around the boundaries of the neighborhood, and oftentimes, those boundaries are tied implicitly or explicitly to money.

But the bite of this parable, and the bite of the theme of radical reversal of fortunes that runs through the heart of the Gospel of Luke is a reminder that in the kingdom of God, what counts isn't possessions or power or portfolios or purple linen clothes. In the kingdom of God, what counts, what's valued, how we treat our neighbors.

My friend, I am convinced that just like the rich man and Lazarus one day, I, too, will breathe my last and die, and I will stand before the judgment seat of God, and there will be an audit of my life. But the basis of that audit will not be on the final balance of my estate on the date of my death. The basis of that audit will be how I stewarded the gifts God entrusted to my care and whether or not I used those gifts in service to my neighbors.

And I don't mean to be a downer, but I am convinced that one day, you, too, will breathe your last and die, and you, too, will stand before the very same judgement seat of God.

The question will not be, "What was your final balance?" The question will be, "Did you love me with heart and soul and mind and strength, and did you love your neighbor as yourself, for this is the sum of the law and the prophets that I gave to you and your ancestors."

#### IV

Oftentimes as a pastor, I get asked, "How big is your church?" And sometimes I'll be a wise guy and answer, "About 60,000 square feet."

But I know what they're asking. How many members do you have? What's the size of your annual budget?"

In the world in which we live, those are the often the means by which we have chosen to measure a given church. And the meaning is clear – bigger is better. The bigger the budget, the bigger the building, the bigger the membership roll, then that must mean that church is really knocking it out of the park.

But the divine reversal in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus is yet another reminder that in the eyes of the kingdom of God, the greatness of a church has nothing to do with buildings and budgets, and everything to do with how that church understands what it means to love its neighbors.

In the eyes of the kingdom of God, the greatness of a church has nothing to do with its balance sheet, and everything to do how does justice, loves kindness, and walks humbly with God.

And so we enter our third century of mission and ministry together here at First Presbyterian Church, may we once again recommit ourselves to the work of being neighbors – both to those who look like us, and those who don't. To those who vote like us, and those who don't. To those who pray like us, and to those who don't. To those who have riches and power, and to those who have none.

For the sum of the law and the prophets is this – you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as you love yourself.

It's just that simple, and just that hard.

Amen.