

A Parable About Facing Poverty

Sermon on Luke 16:19-31

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Trinity United Ottawa

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“The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.” 1 Timothy 6:10

I didn't really *want* to preach about money and poverty today, but the Lectionary scriptures and this week's headlines from the UN Summit on the Millennium Development Goals left me no other honest option.

Did you know that we Protestants are taught to preach with the Bible in one hand and the news in the other? (*Holding each up in one hand.*) It's our job is to connect scripture to our lives in our world today.

And I wonder if you've ever heard of the holey Bible? That's h-o-l-e-y! Preacher and poverty activist Jim Wallis tells this story in his book: “God's Politics: Why the Right Gets it Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It.” He and some friends in seminary were concerned about how rarely they heard sermons in church about poverty and economic justice. They wondered what the Bible would look like, if all the verses about poverty and oppression were removed. So they carefully cut them all out. There wasn't much left of our Holy Book. The Prophets were literally decimated and the Gospel of Luke, which has been our focal gospel this church year, was in the worst shreds. One verse out of every 7 in Luke is about....money issues.

Jesus had more to say about poverty and oppression than about any other subject. So as you listen to the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus from Luke, be careful not to let your response be hijacked by fear about a fiery afterlife. This isn't a warning about life after death, it's one of Jesus' teaching parables about the reversal of economic fortunes in his Kingdom economy. (*Turning a globe upside down.*) Hear it today as a call to participate in overturning the priorities of the world economy, so that the love of money does not lead humanity further into the hell on earth of extreme poverty.

Dramatized Reading of Luke 16:19-31

Are we listening to *our* prophets today? Have you listened to Stephen Lewis, literally weeping about poverty AIDS and hunger in Africa? This week I reread some of Lewis' 2005 Massey lectures: "Race Against Time." In reference to our performance on the Millennium Development Goals, he was scathing even then, admitting that he could no longer offer a measured response, because "I've been emotionally torn asunder by the onslaught of AIDS, and it has profoundly changed my world-view. I can't deny it; it colours everything I believe and say." Lewis dares to show his natural human response to humans living in poverty. He has really *seen* Lazarus with his sores at our door. And I ask myself: are we choosing to ignore them both - Lazarus and the prophet Lewis?

This week, our world leaders at the UN Summit reviewed progress on the Jubilee 2000 goals - do you remember them? - including that promise to halve by 2015 the population in our world living on less than \$1.25 a day. We are still falling shamefully short of those goals and Monday's *Globe & Mail* headline: "Canada chided for lack of interest in world's poor" quoted another prophet against poverty, UN economic advisor Jeffrey Sachs. "Look in the mirror," he says, "Where we are in 2010 is mostly a testimony about ourselves." Ouch.

I do not intend to provoke guilt in you for having some money. Money is not the root of all evil, but rather the *love of money* and our anxious attachment to it. Luke's parable condemns the Rich Man not for his wealth, but for his scandalous *indifference* to the terrible suffering of poor Lazarus on his doorstep. For not seeing the man who was right there. Luke's descriptive details, like the dog licking Lazarus' sores are written to evoke a visceral human response in us. Jesus calls us to see poverty's human face just outside our gate, and feel that heart-tugging response that pushes us to act compassionately. Pushes us to cross the great economic fiery chasm of difference between rich and poor - while we still can.

The story of Lazarus asks us to feel our compassion for the poor and act on our gut human reaction - to help. Jeffrey Sachs observed in the *Globe* that there is actually a whole campaign against compassion. We are told repeatedly that compassion is the mawkish sentimentalism of unserious people." Not according to Jesus!

Are we, like the rich man in the parable, culturally conditioned not to feel our natural human compassion for the poor? We who live comfortably and can turn off the TV news, do need to reflect on whether we are shutting down our hearts - in self

defense perhaps - and ignoring the central theme of Jesus' whole ministry, the biggest topic of our Holy Bible?

Are we deadening our human Spirit and denying Jesus, by choosing not to see the human face of poverty and not express our feelings for those people to our political decision-makers? By how we vote are we silently complicit with the 'rich men' who lead the wealthy west to avert their eyes from the legions of Lazaruses in the world's South...and in our Canadian North?

I take comfort in the knowledge that Trinity United has been faithful to its Jubilee 2000 promise with our Trinity Jubilee Foundation. Some folks here keep finding money every year to fund our projects like our Cause Canada school in Sierra Leone. Each year, we send a significant trickle of living water flowing south to Africa and now north to our own Lazarus communities in the Canadian North through the Arctic Children and Youth Foundation. We are demonstrating that poverty does still move us to be truly human.

By the end of this week, our government made another showy 'promise' to alleviate poverty by combatting malaria and AIDS. But if you read past the headlines you'll know that they have frozen Canada's international aid budget. No one will say where in the budget any 'new' poverty aid money will come from. We should be writing letters to our MPs to ask about that! Who will hold our government accountable for keeping our promises this time? Who, if not us?! Who will signal our MPs that poverty is a priority for their constituents, giving them permission to speak up in Cabinet for increasing world aid. Who, if not us, who have a Cabinet Minister as our M.P?

Lewis and Wallis both hold up the fact that today, we have the knowledge, technology and medicine to feed and heal the world's poor. Wallis declares that "The only real barrier to achieving the Millennium Development Goals is indifference". When the rich ignore Lazarus. There are less than 5 years left for the Millennium Development Goals and Wallis' fear is that they "will become just another dream we once had, and we will indeed be sitting back on our sofas and switching on our TVs and - I am afraid - watching people die on our screens for the rest of our lives."

I'll let this renowned American evangelist respected from left and right and centre, finish my sermon for me:

We will be the generation that betrayed its own heart. I appeal to NGOs and faith groups: to hold us accountable, to be the conscience of the world. In 2015 we cannot look back and say: 'It was not us who acted, it had to be left to the next generation. It was not now, but some other distant time in the future.' That is not good enough. When the need is urgent and our responsibilities clear; and even when the path ahead is difficult, hard, and long, let us not lose hope but have the courage in our shared resolve to find the will to act. And let us say to each other in the words of Isaiah 'though you were wearied by the length of your way, you did not say it was hopeless - you found new life in your strength.' The strength together to fight poverty, remove destitution, end illiteracy, cure disease. The challenge for our time and for our generation. And let us achieve it together."

I Saw the Rich Ones More Voices #127

Race Against Time by Stephen Lewis

God's Politics, Why the Right Gets It Wrong and Left Doesn't Get It by Jim Wallis