

The demands of wealth

O God, you declare your almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity: Grant us the fullness of your grace, that we, running to obtain your promises, may become partakers of your heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

The Collect for Proper 21, The Book of Common Prayer, page 234

THE 19TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST (LECTIONARY: PROPER 21C)

Amos 6:1a,4-7, Psalm 146, 1 Timothy 6:6-19, Luke 16:19-31

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ST. MARK'S-IN-THE-VALLEY

EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND PRESCHOOL

Los Olivos, California

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THE GOSPEL READING: LUKE 16:19-31

Jesus said, "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.'"

Each of today's readings is directed at the rich.

Each of today's readings would understand *all* of us as "the rich."

We may hear it as good news that having wealth, *per se*, is not a bad thing.

And, at the same time, each of us has been ensnared by not just having money but loving money.

We love money and what we think it does in a way that obscures the reality of God, who provides everything and does everything that money does.

So one of the demands of being rich is loving God, not money.

And loving God is not an abstract affection, as we see in scripture today.

To love God is to love the people of earth and to love and care for the earth itself.

Paul's letter to Timothy points out all too clearly how it all goes wrong – time and again – through centuries (this letter is ancient, after all). Beginning with being content with food and clothing, we are soon distracted by better food and clothing, then food and clothing that is better than those around us and on and on to having the best of the best – and so on – in every area of our lives.

And before long, the foundations of our lives are set on matters that are very uncertain, disconnected from the certainty of who God is and will always be: the loving, creative, sustaining, undying source of all life, all of reality.

The gospel reading is a warning in a parable – and is, again, a fable or fiction meant to worm into our brains and hearts and actions. This parable is not at all about the afterlife. It is not explaining anything about a future heaven or hell. It is like Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, the subtitle of which is *Being a Ghost Story About Christmas*. His Ghost of Christmas

Past, Ghost of Christmas Present, and Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come literally awaken the character Scrooge from his sleep and terrify and shock him into a new view of life and those around him. The book clearly draws from biblical themes and may even have a connection to this vision of the rich man and Lazarus.

Let's look again at the closing paragraph in Paul's letter to Timothy. It draws together both the aim and the expression of all of these readings – that echo time and again throughout the whole Bible.

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.

In case being “rich in good works” loses focus for us, we can see a catalog in Psalm 146 of what God is doing – and in which we can collaborate with God:

- justice to those who are oppressed
- food to those who hunger
- set the prisoners free
- open the eyes of the blind
- lift up those who are bowed

down

- love the righteous
- care for the stranger
- sustain the orphan and widow
- frustrate the way of the wicked

We may not see precisely how each of those works of God are going on or can go on in our lives, in the communities in which we live – but God can expand our field of vision, can broaden as well as sharpen what we see, as we are ready to see. Clearing out our anxiety about what we have, what we are getting will help us have greater clarity.

And getting clear on the aim of wealth being the alleviation of the needs of others also helps us de-clutter the scene that is populated by our neighbors of all sorts and conditions.

Strangely, much of the instability that is present in our world, about which the presidential candidates will debate tomorrow night, comes down to themes that are vastly much more clearly stated in these brief scripture lessons today than they will be in the media streams tomorrow.

But, again, what we are hearing is about all of us – and not just each of us individually – but all of us together.

We are at the moment of making a Community Kitchen a reality at St. Mark's and these passages raise a gigantic question mark about why this project is

languishing here, of all places. It is literally about the very first point that Paul raises in his letter to Timothy: “but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these.”

People here around us don't have food security or other basics and we can use our wealth to be part of what God is doing to provide them.... At the same time, working on and with the Community Kitchen will give each of us the opportunity to live in the faith commitment that is our life in God, that is the “treasure of a good foundation for the future,” that is “life that really is life.”

Again, loving God is not an abstract affection....

All of us are swept up in many distractions, most of which, as children of our consumer culture, are confused at this basic level of loving God and using money or using God and loving money.

But, being human and free and loved by God as we are, we can change, both in our minds and hearts – as well as in what we do, individually and together... and increasingly take hold of life that really is life.

We can embrace the deep wisdom Paul writes to Timothy: “There is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it...”



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