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The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

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The Rich Man and Lazarus
Luke 16:19-31



Are there any *Seinfeld* fans in God's house this morning? I know *Seinfeld* is a bit of a dated reference, so a little background for those born after the year 2000: *Seinfeld* was a hugely popular sitcom throughout much of the 1990s. Infamously lauded as the "show about nothing," the weekly 30-minute drama featured the everyday lives of a comedian (Jerry Seinfeld) and his NYC friends. Unlike most other TV shows, *Seinfeld* was unique in its relative lack of an overarching plot: in fact, the show's comedic genius lay in its ability to highlight the profound, often somewhat dark, humor residing in the most mundane of situations: riding the subway, buying a loaf of rye bread at the neighborhood bakery, and perhaps above all, dating. Many episodes include at least one scene in which Jerry and his friends discuss their most recent break-ups, often based on reasons so shallow that one cannot help but laugh: for instance, Jerry once breaks up with a woman because he objects to how she eats peas; Jerry expected that she would scoop them with a spoon, but to his chagrin, she wielded a fork to eat them pea-by-pea, an action Jerry found to be so disturbing that he abruptly dumped the poor lady. A similar incident happens in the first episode of season 7. Jerry and his friend George are eating together in their local café and George mentions that he recently broke up with his girlfriend. Jerry asks why, and George then proceeds to emit a litany of seemingly ridiculous reasons to break-up with someone, including his former girlfriend's superior ability at the game of chess, a skill that leads George to feel self-conscious and insecure and, therefore, in need of a new romantic partner. As George patters on, Jerry leans back in his booth and emits a long, heavy sigh: ugghhhh. "What?" George asks. And Jerry responds: "What are we doing? What is this?"

For a show that in many ways champions—while also making fun of—the shallowness of contemporary life, this is a rare moment of remarkable introspection, reflection, and philosophical, existential, even spiritual, breakthrough. Amidst all the superficiality of replacing girlfriends one right after the other, and more broadly amidst the superficiality that plagues modern life in the big city—constant noise, constant activity, constant busyness, constant accumulation—amidst all of this, Jerry Seinfeld (of all people) pauses for a moment and asks us a very, very good question: "What are we doing? What is this?"

It may seem like a bit of spiritual leap to turn to the words

of Jesus after just quoting from the lips of Seinfeld, but actually, Jerry's question "What are we doing?" is one that Jesus himself asks us to consider through today's Gospel passage.

In today's reading, we hear yet another alert in the Gospel of Luke's extensive warning about the dangers and risks of wealth. Summing up the story briefly, Jesus is telling the wealthy Pharisees a parable featuring a rich man and a poor, sick man named Lazarus. Jesus describes their polar opposite living conditions while on Earth, and then flips the script, describing how in the afterlife Lazarus is exalted while the rich man suffers in torment. The formerly rich man then makes certain requests of Lazarus, including that he be sent back to Earth to warn the rich guy's brothers. This request is denied, as Jesus concludes the story by emphasizing to his Pharisee listeners that their very books (the Law of Moses and the Hebrew Prophets) already stress the importance of living a generous, compassionate life, and that if one does not heed these books, then even a message from a dead man would make no difference.

For Jerry Seinfeld, his existential—even perhaps spiritual—angst, his deep sigh and his question "What are we doing?," were prompted by the superficiality of changing girlfriends, one right after the other, over the most minute of flaws, for the most shallow and self-centered of reasons. Jesus' concern is not with the superficiality of dating but its superficiality, specifically the deadly consequences of the self-centeredness cemented by a life whose primary focus is the ultimately worthless enjoyment of one's own wealth. What do I mean by this? Where do we see this concern in Luke's passage?

Jesus' warning about the dangerous undertow of wealth appears, I believe, in the multiple ways in which he shows the rich man to be profoundly, tragically blind. Three particularly prominent examples of this "wealth blindness" are seen in:

- 1) the man's blindness to the excessive degree of his wealth and consumption. This rich man is not just well off, he is the epitome of being "filthy rich." Moreover, he doesn't just enjoy his riches; he revels in the chance to make sure others know just how deep his pockets can sink. His "purple cloth and fine linen" would have been among the most expensive textiles imaginable, accessible only to the ultra-rich of Roman society. Moreover, these dazzling garments were not saved only for special occasions but

were a daily feature of this guy's quest to show off. As Amy-Jill Levine writes in her excellent study *Short Stories by Jesus* (and I have to thank Paul LoVecchio for recommending this book), "our rich man treats every day as another opportunity to indulge...[T]he verb for 'dressed' ... reinforces this daily indulgence" (272). In addition, this rich man doesn't just enjoy fine delicacies; rather he "feasts sumptuously," suggesting constant and conspicuous consumption on a level that could well be described as "obscene." And all the more so, because of this man's second form of blindness: his utter disregard for the starving, wounded man lying just outside his fancy gates.

2) If the rich man's blindness to his excessive wealth and consumption weren't bad enough, what makes it all the worse is that he displays complete obliviousness, complete disregard for those who have nothing all around him. As Luke tells us, just outside the rich man's gate lay Lazarus, who was poor, covered with sores, extremely hungry, and perhaps most pathetically of all, attended to not by humans but only by street dogs. Dusty, dirty, filthy, semi-wild dogs were the only creatures capable of showing Lazarus any amount of compassion or concern. Now, importantly, it was not because the rich man did not know of Lazarus that he overlooked Lazarus' suffering. We see clearly in the rich man's postmortem words to Abraham that this wealthy guy knows who Lazarus is: he recognizes him in the afterlife and speaks of Lazarus by name, asking for Lazarus to come and ease his torment. So it's not like the rich man somehow did not realize that a man was dying outside his door. He knew Lazarus was languishing there—he even knew his name—and he chose to do nothing. Maybe he reasoned that Lazarus must have made some poor choices in life and was just suffering the consequences of his actions. Or maybe the rich man calculated that if he lent a helping hand to Lazarus, then Lazarus would never learn for himself the value of a hard day's work. Or maybe he worried that if he helped Lazarus, then word would get around and soon he would have dozens of Lazaruses sleeping outside his home, looking for handouts. Whatever the reasons, Jesus makes it clear that the rich man knew of Lazarus' plight and chose to look the other way, chose obliviousness and blindness over compassion and love. As Sr. Mary McGlone has written, "The wealthy man... [allowed] himself to be defined by position and possessions rather than relationships. Unlike the crafty servant of last week's

parable, he failed to discover the potential of his wealth; he could only watch it become worthless in the face of death.”

3) Thirdly, and possibly most seriously, the rich man exhibits a blindness not only to his own extravagant wealth and the suffering of Lazarus, but his wealth also feeds a blindness to basic spiritual truths. Throughout their lives a massive socio-economic chasm separated the rich man and Lazarus. Apparently the rich man’s wealth prevented him from realizing that this chasm would not only continue in the afterlife but that it actually would become reversed. In other words, the rich man failed to see how his wealth, which brought him so much fleeting ostentatious pleasure in this world, could be a major liability in the world to come. The rich man expresses an oblivious “of-course-ness,” a naturalness to his exalted, earthly status. This status leads him to convey a sense of entitlement, along the lines of “oh, yeah, Lazarus is starving and wounded at my gate, but why would I help him? He’s poor; I’m rich. He’s sick; I’m well. He’s weak; I’m strong. That’s just the way it is.” Which very easily becomes “that’s just the way it ought to be,” and moreover, “that’s just the way it will always be.” This “always” quality, this belief of the rich man in the eternal permanence and inherent naturalness of the economic injustice from which he benefits blazes with terrific and terrible poignancy in v. 24, when the rich man—tormented by the flames of hell—cries out to Abraham, asking him to send Lazarus back to the rich man’s family in order to warn them to change their ways. The rich man has become so blinded by the mistaken logic of his wealth—so “wealth blind”—that he still views himself as inherently superior to Lazarus, still entitled to boss him about like a slave. The rich man’s wealth has so blinded him with such a deeply entrenched sense of superiority and entitlement that not even the flames of hell can awaken him to how things really are: to the fact that there is no inherent entitlement to wealth, to the fact that there is nothing natural or right about one person having money or power and another being penniless, to the fact that privilege is actually much more fluid than it might seem: those secure one day may find themselves utterly vulnerable the next. And so, given this fickleness and fluidity, the only wise way to live is to root oneself not in fleeting wealth, resources, or power but in the unchanging ways of God.

But this brings us to another example of the rich man’s wealth blindness, the fact that his wealth has prevented him

from recognizing how God works and who God is. This myopia becomes clear in how the rich man calls out the name of Lazarus to do his bidding (“send Lazarus,” he orders Abraham) while totally oblivious to the actual meaning of the name of Lazarus being emitted from his lips. Lazarus literally means “the one whom God helps.” The rich man, by contrast, is never named in Jesus’ parable, not even once. Not only is he suffering in the afterlife, but his name—his very identity which was so meaninglessly devoted to his personal enjoyment and consumption while on Earth—has been entirely forgotten. The point is not that God somehow despises rich people, but rather that the Bible consistently testifies to God’s particular concern for the have-nots, for the vulnerable; God remembers the names of the poor—the Lazaruses—while those of the self-centered rich disappear.

Jesus’ point thus seems to be that wealth bears a dangerous undertow that tends to pull one away from God, because besides fostering a sense of self-sufficiency, it also can feed a myopia towards the poor, and a blindness to the fact that it is among the poor that God is working. To put it quite graphically, wealth has a tendency to want to avoid poverty just as cleanliness has a tendency to want to avoid dirt. But this reality creates a spiritual problem for the wealthy, because Jesus comes as a dirty baby in a filthy feeding trough. If we actually want to meet Jesus, we cannot stay ensconced in the inn’s plush penthouse. We have to leave our comfy quarters, take the stairs down to the ground floor, walk out into the chilly night air, go back among the refuse behind the crowded inn, enter the smelly, sweaty, noisy, dirty stable, kneel down in our fine robes—down onto the hay and straw, matted with cow urine and soiled by sheep feces; down where no upstanding rich person wants to go—and there behold the son of God.

And so through this parable, Jesus urges us to stop for a moment and ask yourself, “What am I doing? What is this life, what is my life really about?”

Unfortunately, Jerry Seinfeld does not prove up to the task of answering the excellent question that he raises. After breaking through the deep cloudbank of superficiality with his penetrating, existential question, he and his friend George fail to allow that beam of sunlight to lead them to a deeper, more mature, more ultimately satisfying life. Instead, while both men attempt to settle down into committed relationships—with George even

getting engaged for a time—ultimately their efforts at maturity fail, and they bounce back into their bachelor lives of witty banter and brief romantic thrills, but no enduring relationships. For all its laughs along the way, in the end this dark comedy depicts the tragic emptiness of modern life’s profound superficiality.

But Jesus invites us to take a different route. “What are we doing? What is this life really about?” It’s not about the unsatisfying romantic flings of Seinfeld’s sitcom, and it’s also not about the conspicuous and constant consumption characteristic of the rich man’s shallow, self-centered earthly life. In a certain sense, the rich man had it easy: he wasn’t constantly bombarded as we are by the incessant, greedy lies of American capitalism in the 21st century: “you are what you own”; “life without an iPhone is not worth living”; or, as Sprite commercials used to say, you must “obey your thirst.” No, Jesus says, don’t get duped by those lies: you are an eternal spirit wrapped in a very temporary human body: do not live to indulge that which is fleeting. Focus on what endures, center on the values in the heart of God: relationships over possessions, care for the suffering, mercy and justice for the oppressed, radical generosity for all who lack.

Contrary to one of the mantras of good, old American self-determination, God does not help those who help themselves. Rather, as Lazarus’ name literally shows, God helps—in this world or the next—the suffering Lazaruses just outside our doors. And so Jesus’ message this morning is that if we want lives of enduring meaning, lives whose worth transcends the superficiality of this modern age, then we would do well to open our door, learn the name of those sleeping on the doorstep, and perhaps even invite them inside.

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

