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“Guided by Luke: The Spiritual Wealth Gap” – Rev. Seth D. Jones ©

Scripture: Luke 16:19-31

When I was in the other Portland, in Oregon, a few weeks ago, the most stunning aspect of the city was the huge homeless population. It is even worse in places like Seattle, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. Portland is a sympathetic and liberal town, and a couple years ago they lifted the laws that forbade people from sleeping on the streets because the police and courts didn't have the resources to deal with the problem.

And so now, when you walk down certain streets in Portland, some unhoused people have tents set up, others have a partially covered space made with black plastic and cardboard. The parks in the late afternoon have people sleeping on benches and on the grass. The underpasses as you get on the highway are often actual encampments.

I was told by one of our Lyft drivers that he gives rides to a lot of the unhoused people, a few every day. Where does he take them? To work. He pointed to a couple encampments and said, “Most everybody who lives there works.” He told us many of the unhoused were priced out within the space of a couple years with new buildings of condos and housing, which raised the price of everything around it. The tenants couldn't keep up and were forced out of their homes.

The presence of the homeless everywhere was overwhelming to me. If I were a pastor in Portland, I am not sure what I would call my congregation to do. Nothing seems to be working, at least in the short time I was there. Many of the social service buildings, and there are a lot in downtown Portland, were only open a few hours every day. The whole scene had an apocalyptic feel to it.

It would be as if this story today that Jesus tells us were magnified by several thousand. There is not just one Lazarus outside the gate, but many hundreds. Martin Luther once said about this parable, and I am paraphrasing here, “*You can't help the many who need help, but you can help the one who sits outside your gate.*” The question that kept coming up for me in Portland is, “*How?*”

The big difference between Portland, Oregon, and Rockland, Maine and the Mid-coast is that, here, homelessness is more hidden. For a long while, the police were saying there were no homeless in Rockland. But, as many of you know, they camp out behind the church, they sleep down by the ocean, and in more rural areas, the unhoused couch surf, sleep in their cars, and make themselves less visible. But I can tell you, just like Portland, Oregon, has priced out the lower middle class and borderline impoverished, we have done the same here in Rockland. You cannot work as a barista or waiter or

retail person in this town and afford to live here at the same time. It is too expensive. Further, we should be equally disturbed whether the unhoused are in the open or are hidden.

I have presented this as an economic problem, and it is. It has to do with wealth and how we use it as a country. To be clear, though, wealth, in and of itself, isn't the problem for Jesus. What wealth does to us, what it does to the eyes of our soul, is the problem. Timothy says,

*7 For we have brought nothing into this world and so<sup>10</sup> we cannot take a single thing out either. 8 But if we have food and shelter, we will be satisfied with that.<sup>11</sup>*

*9 Those who long to be rich, however, stumble into temptation and a trap and many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. 10 For the love of money is the root<sup>12</sup> of all evils.<sup>13</sup> Some people in reaching for it have strayed from the faith and stabbed themselves with many pains.*

What we see and what we think we see has eternal consequences. And this gets to the difficulties with wealth Jesus is always on about throughout Luke's Gospel.

Wealth creates an illusion of self-sufficiency. We come to believe we are the ones responsible for the creation of it in our lives. We have '*pulled ourselves up by our bootstraps*', or we are '*the self-made woman or man*'. Wealth forms how we see the world. We begin to believe that, since I was able to do this, so can everyone else, so the poor must be poor because they want to be poor, or don't care to care for themselves. Wealth creates systems that isolate and individualize what are really systemic and global problems. When my very close friend in Minneapolis lost his house in the recession of 2008, Bank of America (one of the coalitions of Death Star banks that created the crisis) made sure he knew it was his fault and his problem. They and every other banking institution did this with everyone who lost their home.

What wealth blinds us to creates a vast gap between people. There are very real and measurable chasms created by what is sometimes called 'The Wealth Gap', which is the comparison between the poorest and the richest. Just this past week, new measurements show that the wealth gap in the US is the highest it has been since 1967. To put it another way, the 3 richest people in the US own as much as the bottom 50% of the population.

Economically, we have created a great chasm between those who are able to afford to live in our town and country, and those who cannot. The systems are designed to create that gap, that chasm, between those who have and those who do not. And before we argue that the unhoused have created their own suffering, whether here in Rockland, or in Portland, Oregon, or in San Francisco, or in Seattle, or in San Diego, or wherever, let me just stop you. My answer to that is, "*So what?*" Our economic solutions to these

problems cannot rely on such suppositions. The solutions created from that point of view are, finally, cruel and unhelpful. I also don't have a good solution or answer to the problems, either.

So, what do we do, particularly in relation to our parable today?

**First**, we, as followers of Christ, can begin by *prioritizing spiritual rather than economic solutions*. For all practical purposes, economically, we are all Marxists now, even if we say we aren't. What I mean by that is that we have been conditioned by our government and our economy to believe that all things are based on economic decisions. You, and I, are the means of production for the building of the economy. It is just that we don't produce things, as Marx believed our purpose was. He said we are the means of production and our economic lives are where our power lies. Now, in this economy, we produce money and information, not things.

I believe Jesus calls us to reject this economic way of thinking. Whether rich or poor, this is a blinding worldview. You and I are not a means of production. You are not empowered by the economy, by your ability to produce money. When all things derive and reduce to economic means, we limit our capacity to see what is going on around us greatly. We become blind to the suffering we participate in, and we force those who suffer from that participation to live into our worldview, rather than us living into their reality. In other words, we, like the rich man, turn the gate that surrounds our house into a giant chasm we cannot cross.

We prioritize the spiritual over the economic by recognizing the gifts we have already been given by God. Rather than thinking of the money and things we have as ours, as my personal property that I have accumulated and earned and gained, think instead of all those things as gifts held in trust. You and I are **trustees** of all we have, and we are the **managers of the trust** that we have been given.

If any of you have managed a trust before, been a trustee, you know that they are pretty much inviolate. In other words, what the trust document says is what is true. You cannot make decisions about the trust that violate the conditions of the trust.

What then are we, followers of Christ, the trustees of? To begin with, let's get the language right. In Genesis, Adam is given over the care of the Garden of Eden. We translate the words there in Genesis 2 as dominion, or stewardship. These are not really descriptive of what is going on there. Really, Adam is made a trustee of the Garden. Isn't that a better word for it?

What then are we the trustees of? Jesus says in John 17,

*They (the disciples) belonged to you,<sup>17</sup> and you gave them to me, and they have obeyed<sup>18</sup> your word. 7 Now they understand<sup>19</sup> that everything<sup>20</sup> you have given me comes from you, 8 because I have given them the words you have given me. They<sup>21</sup>*

accepted<sup>22</sup> them<sup>23</sup> and really<sup>24</sup> understand<sup>25</sup> that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. **9** I am praying<sup>26</sup> on behalf of them. I am not praying<sup>27</sup> on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those you have given me, because they belong to you.<sup>28</sup>

**10** Everything<sup>29</sup> I have belongs to you,<sup>30</sup> and everything you have belongs to me,<sup>31</sup> and I have been glorified by them.<sup>32</sup>

To paraphrase, Jesus says, “You have made me a trustee of your people, and now that I am leaving, the disciples are the trustees of all you have given me.” We are the trustees of everything Christ was given by God.

Paul understood this trustee position of the follower of Jesus very well. He says in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians,

*For everything belongs to you, **22** whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas<sup>22</sup> or the world or life or death or the present or the future. Everything belongs to you, **23** and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.*

Knowing then that we are trustees of all we have been given, because it all belongs to God, we can reprioritize from the economic to the spiritual. *How am I a devoted trustee of the gifts I have been given?* Is a much better question than, *What is the economic solution to this problem?*

**Second**, we, as followers of Christ, must *prioritize the individual over the group* or the state. The most difficult and most profound problem I had in Portland, Oregon, was the inability to look the homeless people in the eye and say, “Hello”. I was in a hurry to get somewhere. I didn’t have any loose change or dollar bills with me. I didn’t want to deal with being asked for money. There are a million different reasons to not recognize the human being sitting on the curb as I walked by.

I spent a lot of time wondering about community and state and national approaches that would solve the problem. But as I said above, none of those social programs seemed to be working, at least in Oregon. But finally, what I came to, was this:

If I were a pastor in Portland, Oregon, our work as a church would be very simple. I would have a rotating team of people who would, several days a week, go out with some sandwiches made at the church, or maybe some gift cards to Dunkin’ Donuts or a grocery store, and send that team out into the downtown area. The only rule would be that you could only give the sandwich or gift card after you had a conversation with the person. And not just a short conversation. I mean a conversation where you find out the story of this person and they find out about you.

Because the issue with the rich man is that he never even acknowledges the existence of Lazarus outside his gate. The rich man wasn’t incapable of hearing, because he is perfectly capable of hearing from the hell he is living in after death, and he is perfectly capable of speaking from that place as well. What we are capable of here is what we are

capable of in the afterlife. We can speak and we can listen, whether we are in paradise with angels, or being tormented by demons in Hades. But notice, Lazarus' story is taken over by those who care for his suffering. The angels speak on behalf of Lazarus when speaking with the rich man who did not help with Lazarus' suffering. The impoverished and unhouse don't need to answer for themselves. But they do need allies who will speak for them.

When we deal with the individual person who is suffering, we may never have solutions on a community, state, or national level. But the fact that we have acknowledged the humanity and dignity of another human being, especially in their suffering, means we will never see any of those solutions without also seeing the human beings who are a part of those solutions. And it is individuals who affected by all the decisions we make in our economies, and even more so in our spiritual lives. This is the way Jesus works in our lives and in the lives of others, from one person to another, from the individual outward.

**Third**, we *must close the distance, cross the chasm*, to the 'other'. When we talked about the parable of the Lost Coin, we talked about the act of 'Othering', turning people into others so we can make decisions that justify our position in the culture and community, that rationalize our decisions in the economy, to assuage our guilt in participating in destructive systems. Othering creates a chasm we cannot cross, and this is what the rich man has done.

Crossing the chasm from ourselves to the individual means we have to overcome and step beyond our beliefs, our ideas of who we are and where we came from, our sense of morality perhaps, our ingrained likes and dislikes. We reach into the lives of others in the same way Jesus reached into us and brought us to the light. It means we see through those ideas, possessions, economic and spiritual systems, theologies, cultural ways which blind us to the individual who sits on the other side of the chasm.

We see this chasm-crossing all the time with Jesus. Whether it is going into a graveyard to rescue a chained man rejected by his community, meeting a woman at the well who has all kinds of relationship problems, healing a man who has sat alone at the healing pool for many years, or calling a disciple by name, Jesus reaches through all the culture, all the ideology, all the economic concerns, all the thinking about social solutions, to pull the individual out of the miasma and into the new air of the Spirit, who awakens us all to the light of eternity and love and peace and hope.

I tell you all this so that you can see, because remember the Gospel of Luke is all about seeing. And what has been seen cannot be unseen. We need to see, and upon seeing, we must cross the chasm. There is an immediacy to this '*Great Crossing*', because there are eternal consequences to what we see and what we do not see. Now, even this day, is the time to see the spiritual gifts we have been given and how those gifts make us trustees of

all we have. Now, even this day, is the time to recognize the dignity of the individual and see the person for who she or he is, a loved and beloved child of the God most high. And therefore, now is the time to cross the chasm, to reach across with all the love of God and Christ you have been gifted, so that the person on the other side of that chasm can also experience the gift of God's love. Amen.