

## Unpersuadable

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The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
The Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
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Amos 6:1-8; 1 Timothy 6:1-19; Luke 16:19-31

“If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.” -- Luke 16:31

It would be entirely understandable if you thought I had cherry-picked this morning's lessons for this year's stewardship campaign, but I did not. I'm not above cherry-picking Scripture to fit the theme of a given Sunday, but the Revised Common Lectionary is the source of this morning's combination of readings that have to do with the dangers of wealth.

And that's the first – and, really, the only – point I'd like to make this morning: wealth is dangerous. It's sufficiently dangerous that it can make its possessors deaf, insensitive, unresponsive – unpersuadable, as I've titled this morning's sermon – to the urgings of God's Holy Spirit to do the right thing with their wealth and with their lives.

That's the danger of wealth. It isn't always bad, but it is always dangerous. Wealth is dangerous because it comes with risks, and, even worse, it comes with temptations, and the greatest temptation of wealth is to love it for itself.

That, I believe, is the gist of that frequently misquoted and even more frequently misunderstood passage from 1 Timothy that Mike read for us a little while ago. The tenth verse of 1 Timothy chapter 6 does not say, as people often think it says, that money is the root of all kinds of evil; even in the King James it doesn't say that, not does the Greek original say it, and so far, we haven't found any variant New Testament manuscripts that say it. Scripture simply doesn't say that money is the problem.

What Scripture does say – emphatically, repeatedly, and unambiguously – is that the love of money is a problem, and a very big one.

The prophet Amos said it, in almost every verse in the book that bears his name, about 760 years before Jesus. Paul or someone writing in Paul's name wrote it to Timothy about eighty years after Jesus's death and resurrection, and the evangelist Luke devotes several unique passages in his gospel to matters of wealth and poverty and sharing. Some of the best known stories from the New Testament about wealth and its risks and its potentialities are found only in Luke: the parable of the good Samaritan, the parable of the prodigal son, the parable of the dishonest manager that we heard about last week, and today's reading, the story of the rich man and Lazarus.

Now, we need to clear away some of the bush from this story to see what Jesus is saying. The Lazarus in this parable is not the Lazarus Jesus raised from death in the Gospel of John. That Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary, was a historical figure; our Lazarus, whom the rich man had to step over on his way into his gated mansion, is a parabolic figure, not meant to be understood as a real person. When Jesus told this parable, he didn't expect anyone in the crowd to say, "Oh, I knew old Lazarus – we went to high school together."

The Lazarus in this parable isn't a real person in that sense; he's real in a different, parabolic sense. He's not an individual from a moment in history; he's Everyman and Everywoman from across history. There wasn't just one poor person named Lazarus; there have been millions of poor people, some name Lazarus, some named Miriam, some named Yvonne, and some named Fred.

When Jesus spoke in parables, as he so often did, he was speaking about all of these people, separated by time and space, but united in poverty, which transcends race, gender, culture, and family of origin. Or, rather, poverty doesn't so much transcend those human realities as undermine them, and that's the reason, I think, Jesus spent far more time talking about poverty than he spent talking about sex. Sex has the potential to build up; poverty always wears down. Sex, at its best, can draw us out of ourselves for the sake of another – and I think that's its God-given purpose – but poverty keeps us trapped in the search for enough. I don't think we often grasp the deeper realities that prompted Jesus to order his priorities so very differently from the way we order ours, when it comes to money and sex. And Pope Francis's recent comment that the church needs to stop obsessing about sexual sins and start focusing its attention on the broader social implications of the gospel is a welcome addition to the conversation all of us are having in big-tent Christianity.

In a few weeks, our Bread for the World Team will host a screening of the documentary *A Place at the Table* in our Social Hall; the details are in the announcement sheet, and I hope as many of you as possible will attend our showing of this exceptional film. Rosie and Barbie are two of the poor people whose stories are told in the film, and for me, much of the film's poignancy is its capturing of the lost potential of these two people – one a fifth-grader who can't concentrate in school because she's thinking about food, and the other a single mother whose support is reduced as soon as she gets back on her feet, which throws her back into the cycle of poverty, which is truly vicious.

Another very good film about poverty that our seniors watched recently is called *The Line*, and one of the lessons I took from both of these films is how unjust our nation's economic laws and policies are. I believe they're unjust because in America it's easy to fall into poverty and hard to get out. If our society were truly just, it would be hard to fall into poverty and easy to get out.

But that's a truth we're not going to get. We're like the rich man's five brothers, who know that ignoring the poor and their vulnerability is wrong, but they keep on doing it. They – and we – keep on ignoring what Moses and the prophets tell us about wealth disparity, and the tormented rich man wants someone to return from the dead to get their – and our – attention and warn them – and us – of the coming danger.

And then, shockingly for us liberal evangelicals who think that Jesus will go to extraordinary lengths to save people, Jesus says, through Father Abraham, not to bother. If people ignore the teachings of spiritual geniuses like a Moses or an Amos, they'll ignore as well the warnings of the dead come back to life. It's not that such folks are unpersuaded; it's that they're unpersuadable. They are the lost, the damned, those, in John's words, who "loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil" (3:19).

It's a waste of time, Jesus says, to undertake heroic efforts to bring such people to the light; they're not going to respond. The love of self, swaddled in the false security of wealth, is greater in such people than the love of God, and the only thing God can't save us from is ourselves and the idols we choose to worship instead of God.

I believe that the lost sheep outnumber the rescued sheep by many orders of magnitude, not because God is hateful or parochial, but rather because the sheep refuse to be rescued.

No matter how often we tell children that they need to share, for example, that lesson seems to be left behind – along with their rag dolls and toy soldiers – when those children grow up to become so-called responsible adults.

Responsible to whom? To God? To themselves? To their families? To the spirit of capitalism?

There are sometimes big differences between small words, and there's a huge difference between being responsible *for* oneself and being responsible *to* oneself. The former is morality; the latter is idolatry.

Now I realize, of course, that this is contrary to the spirit of our age. You have to take care of yourself, we're told. Our friends and relatives tell us that. Financial planners tell us that. Nutritionists tell us that. Celebrity psychologists tell us that. And the gun lobby has made a fortune – and a misery of our society – telling us that.

And the rich man in Jesus's parable listened. He listened to all the voices of his day, especially, perhaps, his own, telling him to take care of himself. He listened and he listened and he listened. And eventually he could hear nothing else. He could hear neither Moses nor the prophets speaking to him – and to all of us – about the God of justice and righteousness, who has shown us how to order our lives and our societies, and who hates the stiff-necked rebellion that keeps all the families of the earth from the blessing of being God's chosen people.

Someone said to me the other day, in a rare moment of honest insight, "I guess I heard what I wanted to hear." Is that not true of all of us? Don't we all hear what we want to hear?

One of my professors in divinity school, a renowned Jewish scholar of the Hebrew Bible, used to surf the TV channels on Sunday mornings to listen to fundamentalist Christian preachers, most of whom believed – and some of whom said – that Jews and all other non-Christians were damned. When I asked my professor why he listened to such objectionable preaching, he said he had to know what millions of his fundamentalist Christian neighbors were hearing and supporting. He said he owed it to himself and others to know where the danger was coming from.

I have to confess that I don't have that breadth of spirit. I tend, probably like most of you, to filter my news. My filters are mainly the PD and PBS. I'm still an unrepentant liberal in love with Bill Moyers and Gwen Ifill, still entrenched in the values of the middle class, still on the side of honest labor, still opposed to the culture of violence, and increasingly alarmed by our pillaging of creation and the widening gap between the haves and the have-nots. I'm much more Jimmy Carter than Bill Clinton, and when I walk the dog in the Euclid Creek Reservation, I still regard every leaf on every tree as a gift from a mysteriously loving God.

This is not a stewardship sermon; we'll resume that campaign next week, and it's important. But this sermon is important, too, in its appeal to you and in its hope for myself for spiritual transparency. That term transparency is sexy right now in the corporate and political realms, but it's had a long and rich history under a variety of names. Spiritual transparency, of course, was Jesus's concern, and I think that's what he was talking about when he urged, in Mark's gospel, "anyone with ears to listen!" (4:23). Those are the ears of our souls, delicately tuned by God in our creation in God's own image and likeness, but often damaged and dulled by the world's pounding clamor. Those are the ears that allow us to hear truth being spoken in love, and with our soul's eyes opened by God's grace, we are able to see holiness all around us.

And in our hearing and seeing, we are able to be truly responsible adults – responding to love with love. And gradually, bit by bit, day by day, year by year, we are able to respond not just to love with love, but to everything with love. And thus we become spiritually transparent. And having lost ourselves for a while, we find ourselves for eternity.

That is my hope for myself, and that is my prayer for all of you.