

Exploring the Scriptures:
Money – the Gospel Agenda – Part two:

September 26, 2010
The Great Chasm

Luke 16:1-13
by Blair Odney

We had a very good day yesterday. As promised in the announcements you've been hearing, the Board of Governance presented very concrete program suggestions that will require congregational input over the next few weeks. The folks who came yesterday also began to explore how these concrete plans will affect the property redevelopment project. You can see some of our work on the walls of the sanctuary and you'll be hearing more about these recommendations in the coming days so I won't say much than this. Let me just say that everything we're doing in our mission planning now is bringing us closer to what we will present to Vancouver Burrard Presbytery's long range planning committee. So when you hear the words "mission planning" and you roll your eyes and think haven't we already done that, the answer is no and the process is getting us close to a very good outcome.

One of the really interesting pieces of information we received yesterday came from one of the Board member's analysis of some market research undertaken by the national church. Walter is a member of the congregation whose professional work includes market research with Terasen Gas...so he has some authority in this area. Environics Canada was hired by the National Church to undertake indepth market research on behalf of every congregation in the country. They did it for us too. Using the postal codes of members of the congregation as the way to determine a catchment area, Environics evaluated the lifestyles of the people living in our catchment area, based on information in the latest census; a reason to support the long form census. (but I didn't really say that outloud).

Here's one of the statistics Walter shared with us yesterday. The catchment area, the service area, the area represented in the postal codes where our people live, is predominantly middle-aged, educated and affluent, with 80% of the members having these characteristics. Let me say that again. According to what I heard Walter say, 80% of our neighbors, those who live closest to us, are predominantly middle-aged, educated and affluent.

That's the first part. The second part is this. Lynn Valley United Church is in relationship with only 2% of these people. Walter called it our "capture rate," which I have defined as the people who have anything to do with us .What am I trying to say? According to the research, the middle aged, educated and affluent people of our neighborhood, which represents 80% of that neighborhood, are staying away from the church. They're not coming.

I have to tell you, if I was someone in this category – someone in middle age, who is educated and affluent, coming to church for the first time this morning, and hearing the text we heard Ray read a few minutes ago, I could understand why they're not here. I could understand why they might come once and never come back. At first blush this parable says that wealthy people are going to rot in hell after they die, because they're wealthy.

In fact, I'm quite unsatisfied with the church's relationship with people of financial means. The church as institution isn't particularly friendly towards those who do not live on the street, those who do not use the foodbank, those who are upwardly mobile, make sound financial investments, have revenue properties and send their children to private schools. I remember speaking with someone many years ago who stopped attending worship at a United Church on a regular basis. This was a woman of significant means living above, well above the poverty line. Her beef? Every time the pulpit talked about money, she felt like she was taking a hit, while those below the poverty line were saved. And yet, when it came to the church's annual Christmas appeal, she was the first to get the phone call.

This woman asked the same questions as anyone about the purpose of life, the quality of relationships, the ethical and moral questions that challenged her thinking, what would happen when she dies. Like anyone, this woman had fears, and foibles; she had expectations and disappointments. Like anyone, she came to her church for peace, for connection, for relationship and all she ever got was criticism for being wealthy, except for the day when the financial campaign kicked off. She said to me, the church needs to find a new way to be in relationship with the likes of me. And with that she left the church and hasn't been back.

The text Ray read this morning is another of those instances in which Luke, the gospel writer, discovers a theological agenda in the cultural folklore of his time and inserts it into Jesus' mouth calling it a parable. As we learned last week, this is a story from common life which stops us in our tracks. It is so ambiguous about its meaning, that it teases us into active thought. Active thought. It teases us into critical thinking. And as I mentioned, at first blush, this parable gives a bad rap to the wealthy man for being wealthy. Or does it?

Friends this is only a story. People in first century were fascinated with what happens after death. Perhaps it's a story that satisfied some of that curiosity. Perhaps it's a story about fate and the eternal result of all our life's experience. We often hear it as a way of understanding one possible relationship to the distraction of wealth. The cue about the rich man dressing in purple suggests that he has some connection to royalty.

As I read the story, it's not that the man is rich; it's that the man seems to have lost his compassion. From his position of privilege and abundance, he has lost his ability to see the poor man begging at his gate, the man whose wounds are licked by the street dogs. Lazarus, whose name means God is my help, longs to satisfy his hunger from what fell from the rich man's table. It doesn't say he satisfied his hunger. It says the man longs to satisfy his hunger. That tells me there weren't a lot of leftovers from the wealthy man who feasted sumptuously ever day.

I've heard it said there is a direct correlation between the visible physical poverty of those who live on the street and the invisible spiritual poverty of those who live in mansions.

It would appear that the wealthy man has failed to see and to relate to Lazarus as a fellow child of God. Equally, when I think of the wealthy woman whose story I just told, it would appear that the church lost its ability to see and to relate to her as a fellow child of God. There is a direct correlation between the visible physical poverty of those who live on the street and the invisible spiritual poverty of those who live in mansions.

Fast forward to the day these men die. The rich man finds himself in a hot place, looking up at Lazarus begging for a taste of the compassion that he failed to give when the tables were turned. Lazarus is living with Abraham, the father of the ancient Hebrew people, tasting the spiritual food of his ancestors. When the rich man cries out, Lazarus doesn't even notice him. It's Abraham who says, you had your good life on earth, Lazarus is living his good life now. When the rich man asks that Lazarus be sent to his brothers, who are also wealthy, to warn them of their impending doom, Abraham says, they have Moses and the prophets. The invitation to compassion is already here it's in the faith of your ancestors. The rich man argues, no, that's not good enough, send Lazarus. Abraham replies, if they do not believe in the law and the prophets, they're not going to believe a man who has risen from the dead. Now that sounds familiar. Of course, Luke is telling this story through the lens of Easter setting us up for the events that are to come.

I'm noticing the great chasm about which Abraham speaks. In life, Lazarus experienced what appeared to be a great chasm between his position in life and that of his Jewish brother, the rich man. In death, Lazarus appears to be completely oblivious to the chasm that exists between his life with Abraham and the torment of his Jewish brother, the rich man. The chasm is only seen by the one on the bottom. But does the chasm exist? Luke makes a point of noticing the chasm and remarking on it. "Between you and us" writes Luke; "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." In other words, we can't possibly know each other's experiences.

But you know, I think not. And that's what I think the wealthy woman meant when she said, "the church needs to find a new way to be in relationship with the likes of me." I like the quote I shared with you in the bulletin this morning, from Ric Matthews from the First United Church Street Mission in the downtown east side. Turn to it if you will. "The journey from street to home is not just about walls, floors and roofs. It is about self-worth, relationships, community and belonging. It is a journey of healing that is psychological, sociological, political, and spiritual." There is no chasm between the visible physical poverty of those on the street and the invisible spiritual poverty of those in mansions. Self worth. We long to be known. We long to be embraced and loved and accepted. All of us. When that happens, we come home to ourselves, and with generosity without fear, we give ourselves, our time, our talent and our money to the world in return. Here, friends, is the gospel agenda about money. Believe it and be at peace. Amen.