

To Serve and Not To Be Served

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus which we just heard comes right on the heels of last week's parable about the dishonest manager. You may remember that at the end of that one Jesus said "you cannot serve God and wealth." Luke goes on to say that the Pharisees immediately ridiculed Jesus because they were "lovers of money." So Jesus then told today's parable. I'm always amused that these readings about wealth show up right around the time of our annual pledge campaign, which will begin next month. Jesus is very clear about how we should use our money and possessions, and our culture hasn't progressed very far beyond the Pharisees.

What strikes me this time around is that today's parable is also about how *people* are used. Clothed in purple and fine linen, the rich man feasted sumptuously every day. There's no indication that he ever took any notice of the poorly clothed man covered with sores who lay under his table. Yet we discover when they both died that he knew Lazarus' name.

Each received his predictable reward after death. The one who suffered all his life was received into the bosom of Abraham, a place of comfort and refuge. The one who had lived a life of ease was now in torment. What's remarkable is that the rich man still expected to be served. He asked that Lazarus tend to his wants, even though he had never considered what Lazarus needed. He was still blind to the needs of others.

Thus his appeal to Abraham is in vain. It's telling that the rich man wouldn't even speak directly to Lazarus; he went through the person he considered to be in charge. Abraham was not impressed. Not only did he *not* want to help the man; he couldn't. A great chasm was fixed, an unbridgeable space, between Abraham and Hades.

The rich man didn't give up. Well, if that won't work, he said, then send Lazarus to my brothers so that they're warned about what's to come if they don't repent. Abraham replied, they have their warning in Moses and the prophets. The rich man probably knew that his family didn't pay much attention to the law, so he tried one more time to use Lazarus. If someone went to his brothers from the dead, he said, they will repent. Abraham nixed that as well, saying: "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone rises from the dead."

This last response is clearly intended as a reference to the resurrection of Jesus, and would have been heard that way by Luke's hearers. Throughout this story we also hear echoes of a different Lazarus in John's Gospel, whom Jesus raised from the dead.

The rich man's problem is that he has become so accustomed to being served and having whatever he wants that it has changed his entire outlook on life. What we do with what we have changes who we are. That's an important message that we also heard in the passage from the letter to Timothy. "Those who want to be rich fall into temptation," the letter says, "and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil." Note that it's the *love* of money, not money itself, that is the root of evil – that love of money that the Pharisees had.

That's true no matter how much money we have available. I know both wealthy people and people in poverty who game the system to their benefit and expect others to serve their needs. It's a *human* trait. We would do well to remember that the temptation to use people for our ends is independent of wealth.

That's why we need constant reminders of how people should be treated, reminders from Scripture and especially from the words of Jesus. It's also why we periodically renew our Baptismal Covenant. We need to remember to respect the dignity of *every* human being, to seek and serve Christ in *all* persons.

So yes, it's amusing that these parables show up around pledge time. We should prayerfully reflect on what we do with the things God has given us. Yet it's even more important to consider how we treat the people we encounter every day. Do we use them for our own benefit? Or do we consider what their needs might be? Fortunately we have not only Moses and the prophets to tell us; we also have the example of Jesus Christ, who came not to be served but to serve. So we, too, when we have done what Jesus calls us to do, can simply say: "we have done only what we ought to have done."