

“Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor; rich man, poor man, beggar-man, thief; doctor, lawyer, Indian Chief.” Remember that old nursery rhyme? In today’s Gospel, there’s no tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor; or doctor, lawyer, Indian chief. But, there’s a poor man/beggar-man and a rich man/thief. Lazarus and the rich man are a study in contrasts. It’s hard to imagine a greater gap between two people.

The rich man lived in a magnificent house. Lazarus was homeless; he slept on the streets. The rich man dressed in luxury cloth, Lazarus in rags. The rich man dined on fine food, Lazarus starved, wasted away, his skin covered with sores but so weak he couldn’t even push away the rich man’s dogs when they licked them. No wonder he would’ve gladly eaten the scraps that fell from the rich man’s table!

Whenever the rich man went by, he’d beg. But the rich man, caught up in his own concerns and comfort, didn’t care; never gave him a thing. Why waste money, food, anything, on such a miserable dreg, who could do nothing for him? As a new political slogan says, “Has a poor person ever given you anything?”

Well, they both died. And, surprise! There’s a great reversal of fortune. As Jesus had told his disciples, “The first became last and the last first.” As the angel Gabriel has promised Jesus’ mother, Mary, “The hungry were filled with good things, and the rich were sent empty away.” Lazarus finds himself in a heavenly “mansion,” where he feasts with Abraham. The rich man finds himself in Hell, where he’s become the beggar, pleading with Abraham to send Lazarus to dip his finger in water to cool his burning tongue. Maybe Lazarus would’ve done it, too. But Abraham wouldn’t allow it. The gap between the two, developed in life, had become fixed forever. The chasm was too great. Lazarus couldn’t cross over.

So, this story raises a question, doesn’t it? What do we do with all we’ve been given? How do we *invest* it? To what purpose do we put it? Many say, “Duh! For yourself!” So, since that fits with our impulse to think first of ourselves, of what we think brings us comfort, pleasure, affirmation, success, power, or security, that’s what we usually do. We “invest” the time, the talents, and the treasure God has given us, in things that bring us whatever it is we want most for ourselves – comfort or pleasure, affirmation or success, power or security. We don’t consider another place or purpose for our “investments.”

But centuries before Jesus told this story the prophet Jeremiah identified another purpose. Here’s the situation! As Jeremiah had prophesied, Jerusalem had fallen to the Babylonians, who’d taken many of the people into exile. Yet, the correctness of his prophecy had so angered those who were left that they’d thrown him in prison. From there, he’d warned them not to try to overthrow their new masters, but they ignored him and staged a revolt, which prompted the Babylonian army to lay siege to the city.

Well, it seems that Jeremiah had a cousin, Hanamel, who had a farm in Anathoth, outside the city walls, but because of the siege, he couldn’t get out to farm it. So, what does Hanamel do? He visits Jeremiah in prison and appeals to what was called the “Law of Redemption” to get Jeremiah to buy the property. The Law of Redemption said that if anyone in a family had property that was in danger of being lost, it was the duty of the oldest member (in this case, Jeremiah) to make sure it stayed in the family.

But for what purpose? The property couldn’t be reached and might have already been plundered by the Babylonians. And Jeremiah was in prison and might never get out. Even if he did, he’d likely need every cent he had for the food that would surely become scarce and expensive because of the siege.

Amazingly, Jeremiah doesn’t respond with, “The Babylonians are about to attack and I’m in prison, and you ask me to buy some property that I’ll probably never see? Are you crazy?” No, contrary to “good business sense,” he agrees to buy the land. And when he does, he does it in a very conspicuous way, telling his aide to store the deed in a safe place (an earthenware jar) where it will keep - **for a long time!**

Jeremiah does this because, in spite of the certainty of a Babylonian victory, he trusts God’s word that one day, “Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.” He doesn’t buy the land for his own use, but because he trusts God’s promise for a better future and wants his descendants to share in it. In spite of his own dire situation, he gives of his meager resources, for their future benefit.

Those around Jeremiah probably thought him a fool. There was no way he'd ever plant or harvest on that land! Why invest in something that will bring you no reward, do you absolutely no good?

Well, the only possible answer is that he was thinking about more than his own personal benefit. You "invest" in such a way because you care about something beyond yourself, those in need, those you're called to nurture, those who come after you - care enough to be willing to limit yourself for their benefit.

Limit yourself for someone else's benefit! What a Christ-like idea! And so, not surprisingly, what a counter-cultural idea! And, therefore, also, what a challenging idea!

At a rally for missions, a wealthy church member declared: "When I was a kid, I made a dollar a week mowing lawns and gave every cent to missions." Everyone applauded, except his wife, who whispered as he sat down, "I dare you to do it again!" He turned pale, now that he had so much it was hard to imagine such generosity. Sometimes, the more we have the harder it is to "invest" in others.

Rich man? Same problem! Loved what he had so much he couldn't imagine parting with it, least of all for a miserable beggar. He was blind not only to Lazarus but to the truth that, *You can't take it with you*. So, true! I've conducted many funerals, but have yet to see a hearse with a U-Haul trailer behind it!"

Martin Luther said, "God divided our hands into fingers so money could slip through them." Maybe you feel, with all your bills, that enough is already slipping through! But he was talking about giving. God's blessings aren't just meant to come to us and stop - but to flow through us so God's work can be done!

God gives to us generously - time, talent, and treasure. If we want to be spiritually healthy, not stagnant, we need to learn to "let it flow," and pass it on. That means seeing God's abundant blessings, being grateful for them, and thanking God by sharing them in ways that express God's love.

Opportunities to do that, with our time, talents, and treasure, are all around us, opportunities to show our gratitude by looking at the blessings we've been given as resources for God's work and "investing" them in caring for those in need, nurturing our children, and being good stewards for those who come after us.

The rich man missed those opportunities. He chose to ignore Lazarus, and took the blessings that poured into his life, blessings which God intended for him to pass on, and kept them for himself.

An early church leader commented on what it means to do that. He said, "Whoever has two coats, and doesn't share one with someone who has none, is a thief." By allowing the poor man to remain a beggar, the rich man made himself a thief. He stole from Lazarus and, ultimately, from God. As he did, he dug his own chasm, an ever wider gap between himself and Lazarus. God didn't send the rich man to Hell. He dug his way there himself. He merely ended up in death where he was already heading in life.

Refusing to share God's blessings makes us - thieves! Sobering, isn't it? What we do with the blessings we receive, shapes what we become - thieves like the rich man, or agents of blessing, like Jeremiah.

We have a choice! Hold on to as much as we can for ourselves (in the process become thieves) or let it become part of the on-going flow of God's gifts to the world, and thus becoming agents of blessing.

The danger comes from blocking the flow of God's blessing, trying to tightly hold on to it, and not let it flow through our fingers. When we do we dig a pit between ourselves and God, maybe too wide to cross.

This parable is a challenge and a warning. We've heard it clearly today, just like the rich man's five brothers heard Moses, the Law and the prophets. They could claim no excuse. We have no excuse.

Yet, there's a bright spot. Father Abraham was tough. God is more gracious. God did send someone to "rise from the dead", Jesus. If we're not convinced by Moses, the Law, and the prophets, that giving is living, maybe we'll be convinced by Jesus, who gave himself completely for our sake.

What you and I do with Jesus' parable and what we do about it is ultimately up to us. When the great reversal of fortune comes, which side will we be on?

Gracious God,

Thank you for the blessings you shower on us every day –

...time that we can choose to use in so many ways,

...talents we can employ for so many ends,

...treasure that we can invest for so many purposes

Thank you that through these abundant blessings, these good gifts,

...you provide us not only with all we need for life,

...but with choices about how to “invest” them.

You give us opportunities to choose to “invest” them fearfully, ungratefully, selfishly, for ourselves,

...or confidently, gratefully, unselfishly, for you and for others. they provide us and our love ones

Help us, every day, to look for your abundant blessings, and seeing them to be grateful for them.

Help us, then, to be moved by that gratitude so that we want to thank you by “investing” them

...in ways that show it, ways that honor you, share your love, serve your life-giving purpose.

Help us to do that with our time, especially with those you’ve entrusted to our nurture, our children.

Help us to “invest” our time with them in ways that strengthen their faith and their spirits,

...in being with them, sharing meals, prayer times, stories, and play,

...and in coming to know your wondrous creation.

Help us to do that with our talents, especially with the faith family with which you have blessed us.

Help us invest our talents, so our faith family can grow in being Christ’s body,

...doing his loving work, making him visible in the world,

...by sharing them to do the work of education, worship, ministry, and mission,

...to which you’ve called us in this time and place.

Help us to do that with our treasure, especially where we’ve been holding tightly to it,

...and such blessings would be possible in the lives of others and in the work of our faith family

...if we would be grateful enough, trusting enough, and loving enough, to loosen our grip

...and let some go for your work.

We ask these things remembering not only the story of the rich man and Lazarus,

...but also the example of Jeremiah and his seemingly foolish investment in property he’d never see,

...praying in the hope that our selfishness will not make us thieves,

...but agents of your blessing for others.

We pray for our faith family.

We are grateful for the love you have given us to share.

We ask that you strengthen it daily; make it rich in patience, understanding, trust, and forgiveness.

Help us to be a sign to others of your gracious goodness and love.

We pray for all of our ministries and missions.

We are grateful for how we’ve been able to give to one another and others through them

...and for how we’ve grown by sharing in them.

Bless us with renewed strength and new participants so they may continue to grow and honor you.