

INI

Our second lesson and Gospel today both talk to us about wealth and how it can be abused and used. Our reading from 1st Timothy includes the familiar line, “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.”

The emphasis here is not on condemning wealth, but on how our money and other resources are to be used. The wealthy man in our Gospel went to Hades when he died not because he was wealthy, but because he ignored the poor man lying at his gate. Jesus does not give the rich man so much as his own name, because he lavished his wealth on himself. He dressed in linen and purple clothes - a color none but the rich could afford - and feasted every day.

Jesus told this parable to the Pharisees, who believed that wealth and possessions were a sign of God’s favor, kind of a first-century prosperity

gospel. By saying that the rich man was punished after death, he flipped the script on them, critiquing that his attitude toward Lazarus, the poor man.

A few years ago, when I was attending the convention of Deacons in Canada, I played the role of the rich man in a dramatic reading of today's gospel. Creating the sense of distance and a great chasm between us, I sat on a lower step of the chancel of the cathedral in Victoria, BC. The deacons playing Abraham and Lazarus stood on the other side the chancel, on the highest level.

In the role of the wealthy man, I called out to Abraham, asking him to send Lazarus to me, to bring me a bit of water. Even in death, calling from Hades, the rich man won't talk directly to Lazarus. He asks Abraham to send him, as though Lazarus is but a servant.

Abraham explains there is a chasm between us. We realize it is one that the rich man had created and observed while living, as he stepped over

Lazarus at his gate and avoided his gaze and ignored his pleas for some crumbs of bread.

As the rich man sees his pleas to Abraham are going nowhere, he changes tactics - and asks that Abraham send Lazarus to his five brothers so that they can avoid the punishment he is now enduring. Abraham replies that they have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.

The Torah and the prophets repeatedly tell the people of Israel to care for the poor and the powerless - there is no more consistent message than, Love God, Love your neighbor. All the rest is commentary, according to the great teacher, Rabbi Hillel.

In the dramatic reading, the five brothers are not present, but in another sense, they are. If we see ourselves in the parable, it is probably as the five brothers. We have Moses and the prophets - are we listening to them?

One of the critiques of wealth in both of our readings is that our concern for possessions comes between us and God and that it gets in the way of

doing what God asks us to do, to care for each other, for the poor and for the very earth we live in.

You probably saw at least parts of Greta Thunberg's powerful speech before the United Nations. Greta is the Swedish teenager who has been striking for climate action every Friday for several years. She shamed her audience about their disregard for the earth, for climate change, for mass extinction and other calamities rooted in our selfish use of natural resources and dumping carbon into the atmosphere. She can speak like that because she doesn't care what people think about her. Like the kids from Marjorie Stoneman Douglas school in Florida, she speaks her mind because she can. As a column in the Washington Post said,

With every public appearance, they are saying:

This is what it would look like, to be free to do the right thing. This is what you would say, too, if you weren't beholden to donors or viewers, if you didn't have to muster the right sound bites for your next reelection campaign, if you weren't

afraid of sacrificing some of your personal  
comfort for the greater good.

This is how our possessions and comfort come between us and God,  
between us and what God is leading us to do. Importantly it's not the  
wealth or possessions or comfort themselves that are the problem: It is our  
reluctance to put those things at risk or to use those things in service of  
other people, our fragile earth, or wherever God is leading us.

We are the five brothers that the rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus  
to, so they may avoid his fate. Abraham answers that they have Moses  
and the prophets, they should listen to them. We also have Moses and the  
prophets, and we also have the one risen from the dead in Jesus Christ to  
lead us to understand God's will for us. And yet as a society we fail to  
repent of our sins against the earth, we don't turn away from our love of  
comfort.. We confess the sins done on our behalf, even if we personally  
use paper straws and turn the heat down in winter and the air conditioning  
up in summer.

I read another powerful essay this week about the earth and our lack of care for it. The writer, Leah Schade, was writing in EcoPreacher. She reminded us that the Hebrew word for Spirit is *ruach* which also means breath of God, the breath that animated Adam and Eve in the Genesis story, the spirit that moved over the face of the deep, the very air we breathe. By burning the ancient remains of plants and animals which had been safely buried for millions of years we are polluting *ruach*, the Spirit, the breath of God and the only atmosphere we have.

That's the importance of moving to zero carbon as quickly as possible. Solar and wind are becoming cheaper than fossil fuels, but we have a huge investment in dirty fuels that politicians and incumbent power companies try to protect. They, and we who support them by buying dirty energy, are called to push back, to reduce our use of fossil fuels and single use plastics. We can speak out against politicians who roll back regulations on fuel economy and pollution, or those who want to raise taxes or costs of electricity to support uneconomical coal-fired power plants.

Even in the face of impending disaster, we are to use our wealth to proclaim hope and to defy the common wisdom. That's why Jeremiah, in our first reading, bought the field, to redeem it for his family's heritage. The armies of Babylon were besieging Jerusalem, in what was to become the defeat of Judah and lead to exile in Babylon. Jeremiah the prophet knew what was to come and had prophesied doom and defeat. It was Jeremiah, after all, who had said we can tell true from false prophets. If they foretell good things, they are false. So why, in the face of certain defeat, does he buy a field? Surely his 17 silver shekels would have been more valuable in exile than a plot of land in Judah. His purchase was in accord with Levitical law in keeping the land in his family, of course. But Jeremiah was also saying that God plays the long game. He's affirming that the exiles will return to the land. Jeremiah's 17 shekels preserved the family's stake and proclaimed that the exiles would ultimately triumph.

Similarly, we can use our 17 shekels to move to wind and solar power, and to invest in clean energy.

As our reading from 1 Timothy says, They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

---

<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/library/bible-study/bible-study-pentecost-16-c-september-29-2019>

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/greta-thunberg-weaponized-shame-in-an-era-of-shamelessness/2019/09/25/66e3ec78-deea-11e9-8dc8-498eabc129a0\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/greta-thunberg-weaponized-shame-in-an-era-of-shamelessness/2019/09/25/66e3ec78-deea-11e9-8dc8-498eabc129a0_story.html)

[https://www.patheos.com/blogs/ecopreacher/2019/09/we-will-never-forgive-you-greta-thunberg-climate-unforgivable-sin/?utm\\_source=Newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=Christians+For+a+Better+Christianity&utm\\_content=43](https://www.patheos.com/blogs/ecopreacher/2019/09/we-will-never-forgive-you-greta-thunberg-climate-unforgivable-sin/?utm_source=Newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Christians+For+a+Better+Christianity&utm_content=43)