

Year C Proper 21
Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15
Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16
1 Timothy 6:6-19
Luke 16:19-31

Today's epistle and gospel are the kind of readings that make us uncomfortable. In fact, if they don't, then you haven't been paying attention. They target our greed, our pride, our gluttony, our envy—in fact, almost every one of the classic seven deadly sins appears here. The lessons are squirm-worthy. The biggest target of all here seems to be money. But there is much more at stake here than that; money is an issue, yes, but these lessons are ultimately about our relationships—with one another, and with God.

The selection from Paul's letter to Timothy continues his theme of how to live a Christian life. He is clear that the pursuit of wealth never brings anyone happiness, because it leads people "into temptation" and causes "many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction." So chasing after money causes people to do evil things that they might not do otherwise. I imagine we've all seen cases of that: embezzlement, gambling, theft. In fact, Paul says "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains." Note, please, that Paul did NOT say that money is the root of all evil. So many people misquote this passage, and put the blame on money. No—it is the LOVE of money that is the root of all kinds of evil. The LOVE of money. Paul uses that word LOVE advisedly, because we are not supposed to love money—or any **thing**. We are supposed to love—who? GOD, right.

We are supposed to love God, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. When we love something other than God, there is a theological name for it, that I know you've heard. We call it *idolatry*—making an idol of something other than God. And it's a real problem. From the beginning of our history with God, we have turned away from what was really holy, and idolized things, like statues of gods, money, and other people. So Paul wants Timothy not to fall into the trap of loving money, but to "pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness." We might say, well, that's fine for Timothy, but what about the people who have money already? Are they lost? Well, no—Paul has advice for them, as well.

They are to do good works with their money, he says, and actually be in relationship with their brothers and sisters in Christ. "Command [the rich] not to be haughty," Paul says, "or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment." So we're not to hold ourselves above the poor, if we happen to have money, because money *can always be lost*—riches are an uncertain thing. Instead, we should focus on God, who is always faithful, and who provides us with all that we truly need. Paul goes on to say that the rich are to "do good, to be rich in good works, generous and ready to share," which is easier said than done, isn't it? Especially today, in our consumer-oriented society which says we should make more and more money, and purchase things that exhibit our wealth. But no—we should be sharing, generous in our giving. Paul says that doing this is "storing up...the treasure

of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life." Giving away our earthly treasure, our money, means that we create a spiritual treasure, and realize what real life is. It's not the love of money.

Now let's take Paul's advice to Timothy, and look at Jesus' parable about Lazarus and the rich man. This is a very interesting story for a number of reasons. To begin with, there are two characters in it with names—can you think of another parable where Jesus gives anyone a name? Usually, it's "there was a woman," or "there was a man with two sons," or "a man went out to sow seeds," and no one is given a name, because the lesson of the parable doesn't require it. But here, the poor beggar is given the name Lazarus, which means "one whom God has helped." The rich man, you notice, is not named. And yet, as the story begins, who is it that we identify with? Isn't it the man who "was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day"? I know I'd rather be like him than like the "poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table." Then to make things worse, we hear that "even the dogs would come and lick his sores." At this point in the story, Jesus' listeners might be thinking that Lazarus's name is highly ironic. It doesn't seem like God is helping Lazarus very much.

Soon enough, however, both the rich man and Lazarus die. Notice the rich man was buried, but Lazarus was not—he is carried away by angels to be with Abraham in paradise. Now we see that Lazarus's name has been true all along; God sustained him in life, and now he is comforted eternally, and is with the founder of his faith. But what about the rich man? Well, he is in Hades, suffering an eternal roasting. Yet even here, notice that he hasn't learned his lesson.

He looks over and sees Lazarus with Abraham, and he *recognizes* him. Notice that the rich man recognizes him—AND he knows his name. So it's not that the rich man didn't know that Lazarus was suffering outside his gate; when they were both living, he knew him by name, and he let him suffer outside his gate. Now, in his arrogance, he presumes to ask Abraham to "send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in agony in these flames." He doesn't say, "brother Lazarus, please have mercy on me—I'm sorry I ignored your poverty and your suffering when we were alive!" No he still thinks of Lazarus as being less than he is—a servant not even worth lowering himself to speak to—someone whom he can send Abraham to, to be sent on an errand. He doesn't understand the complete change in both his and Lazarus's status.

Then Abraham explains how things stand now: the rich man had his good things during life, and apparently he didn't follow the commandments, nor did he share his money. Now he is punished for it. Lazarus suffered and was poor all of his life, now he is rewarded. *And* there is apparently a huge abyss between heaven and hell, which makes it impossible for anyone to pass between the two places. Abraham doesn't seem particularly happy to tell the rich man these things—he even compassionately calls him "Child," but there's nothing that can be done for him. Yet, even after hearing Abraham's explanation, the rich man still doesn't get it. He still sees Lazarus as "other," and "less

than.” He again asks that Lazarus be sent on an errand, this time to his five brothers, to let them know *his* plight and warn them to change their ways. But no—his brothers have ample warning in the commandments, and in all the prophets, Abraham says. If they simply follow them, they’ll be fine. But the rich man knows from his own experience how easy it is to ignore scripture, right? So he says “No Father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!” If the ghost of Lazarus appears to his five brothers, and explains everything to them they will believe, and change their ways. That’s a fairly persuasive argument—I mean, how many of us have had an experience like Ebenezer Scrooge’s visit from his dead friend Marley? It had a dramatic effect there. But Abraham declines the rich man’s request, saying “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced, even if someone rises from the dead.”

There’s a little dramatic irony here for us, isn’t there? Because we know that Jesus is referencing his own approaching death and resurrection in telling this story. Luke is implying that **we** have Jesus’s death and resurrection to convince **us** to repent. But have **WE** been convinced? Have **we** had a change of heart? Do **we** take the scripture for our own, and love God, and love our neighbors as ourselves?

When I first visited Christ Church, to interview with Matt, I mistakenly went to Bishop’s Chapel, thinking it was the office. The gentleman on duty there told me, no the office was up the hill behind the church. This was the food pantry. “A stand-alone food pantry,” I thought, “already they have my heart!” And then when I began serving here, I discovered your new shoe outreach, and the way you partner with Panera, Wegman’s, Powhatan, Millwood Country Club, and so many others to serve people in need. I am impressed that you do perceive the poverty in our community. My wonder is whether there is still a Lazarus that we are not seeing. Are there still people on the margins who need our support? Our baptismal covenant calls for us to “seek and serve Christ in all persons,” and to “Respect the dignity of every human being.” If we are to do that, and as Paul’s letter says, “do good, to be rich in good works, generous and ready to share” what does that look like? It’s different for each person, as we consider what we have, and what we can give. But I invite you to prayerfully consider this in the coming days. What does it look like for **YOU** to “Seek and serve Christ in all persons”? What does it look like for **YOU** to be “generous and ready to share”? What does it **really** look like to “love your neighbor as yourself”?

Amen