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If I Were a Rich Man

When I was young, one of the movies I remember seeing with my entire family was *Fiddler on the Roof*. It remains a staple of Broadway tour companies and community theatres. The plot centers on the main character Tevye, the father of five daughters, as he tried mightily to hold onto Jewish religious and cultural traditions as events were changing around them in Russia when the Tsar still ruled. He found himself pushing up against his daughters' desire to marry for love. And the music in this movie and play is a standout of course: *Tradition*; *Sunrise, Sunset*; and my favorite: *If I were a Rich Man*.

Tevye sings: "Dear God, you made many, many poor people.
 I realize, of course, that it's no shame to be poor.
 But it's no great honor either!
 So, what would have been so terrible if I had a small fortune?"
 If I were a rich man,
 If I were a wealthy man.
 I wouldn't have to work hard.
 I'd build a big tall house with rooms by the dozen,
 Right in the middle of the town.
 A fine tin roof with real wooden floors below.
 There would be one long staircase just going up,
 And one even longer coming down,
 And one more leading nowhere, just for show."

Last week's difficult gospel story of the dishonest manager left us hanging with these words of warning from Jesus: "No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

The readings line up as a conspiracy of sorts this morning. At the very least, they should make us pause to consider the role of money in our lives. How we use it, who has it and who doesn't? How having a lot of money can separate the haves and the have not's of the world.

Dreaming of being rich is not unique the Fiddler's Tevye. Who among us, even for a moment, has not imagined winning the Publisher's Clearing House or Powerball jackpot? Finally, we imagine, we wouldn't have to worry about bills or working or even think about money – or so we think. Never mind that we hear that money can't buy happiness, we convince ourselves that we be happy to give it a try.

Eight centuries before Jesus the prophet Amos paints a vivid picture of what it was like to live well and at ease in Jerusalem as other parts of the world raged and burned. The rich of the day would lie on beds of ivory, and lounging on their couches, eating lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall – singing idle songs and drinking wine from bowls. Seemingly, they had no care in the world but themselves. But their time would come. The prophet warns that they would be the first to be carried off into exile and “the revelry of the loungers shall pass away.”

The Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy (1 Timothy 6:6-19) and affirmed what we’ve heard to be true about money: you can’t take it with you when you die. “We brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; For 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.”

Are we getting the message?

Let’s roll out the Gospel story to boot. Paul could have been talking about the rich man in Luke’s telling of what tradition has referred to as the parable of ‘Dives and Lazarus’ -- *Dives* being Latin for rich man.

A picture is painted of two worlds: a world of extreme luxury, opulence and indifference and one of hunger, suffering and dehumanizing poverty.

We don’t know if the rich man slept in Amos’ beds of ivory. We do know that he was (v. 19) dressed in royal purple and fine linen and feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. (v. 22)

When both men die we quickly learn how brutal and stark a reversal of fortune can be. After a lifetime of indignity and hunger, Lazarus was poor no more. He finally had the closeness and comfort that was denied him during his life: he sat in honor next to Abraham. It was the rich man who was tormented in the flames.

Remember, it is not money that at the root of evil but the love of money. The love of money blinded the rich man. He saw no one, cared for no one, except perhaps his five brothers who he wanted to save from experiencing his same fate.

The most telling part of this vivid parable for me is, only then, when his life was over does the rich man even acknowledge and see the man who had sat and begged at his gate for food. Now he sees and finally names Lazarus. “Send Lazarus to ease my suffering.” Abraham was not buying this post deathbed familiarity. You had your chance, bubby. You blew it. It was too late. Pleading for Lazarus to be sent on a mission to warn his five brothers, Abraham brushes off the rich man. They have Moses and the prophets. That should be good enough for them even though it apparently meant little for you.

What does it take to be seen, noticed and named?

We often point to so-called iconic photos that changed the way the world thinks about a certain event or tragedy. One thinks of the haunting 1972 photo of the nine-year-old girl in Vietnam fleeing a Napalm attack that burned away her clothes. She has a name: Kim Phúc. Or the photo of the 3 year old Syrian boy, in a red t-shirt and Velcro tennis shoes, who washed up on a Turkish beach last year. He had a name: Aylan Kurdi. And yet another picture: the dazed and bloodied 5 year old boy from Aleppo sitting in the back of an ambulance: Omran Daqneesh. This past week we saw video footage of a man killed by Tulsa police. The moment he died he had no name. Was he frightened or confused? We don't know. We now know his name: Terrance Crutcher.

The whole point of focusing on downside of loving money and what it could buy is that we risk losing sight of our own humanity. Who is at our gate? Who are we afraid of and why? Who do we pass by on our way to work? Who might need our help as much as our good thoughts and prayers?

What does God desire? God's desire is to make us whole. That is what the church calls salvation and redemption.

And to be whole and alive, we have to know what to fill our lives with: Faith, companionship, family, music, friends, community, joy, rest, work, acts of compassion, giving, sharing, sacrificing for others.

God wants us to see the people in the world around us, to not close the door so tight on our lives because we are afraid who might be knocking. To see Christ in everyone we meet: the scoundrel, the cheat, the immigrant, the refugee, the checkout person, the protester, the choir director, the rich man, the car salesman, the politician and the priest.

To see Christ in the face of the one we look at in the mirror when we brush our teeth or shave and do our hair.

We are all dead until we allow God to bring us back to life again and open up our eyes to the Lazarus' of this world.

It's not too late. It's never too late.

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