

“Trust Issues”  
Luke 16:19-31

Pastor Liz Miller  
September 29, 2019

I moved to Michigan during the year of the last presidential election, and it’s hard to believe another huge election is upon us. I have warned Edgewood’s Faith Community Nurse Leah that the blood pressure screenings after worship are likely to show elevated levels over the next 14 months.

After living in states like California and Connecticut where my vote only mattered a tiny bit, it’s pretty fun to live in Michigan during presidential campaign seasons. Candidates visit! Commercials are tailored to us! My mailbox is full for the first time since 2016! The novelty hasn’t yet worn off.

One of the aspects that make elections so interesting is that it seems like every candidate wants to reach out directly to *me* aka The Middle Class. Everyone has speeches that are meant to inspire the middle class to take action, reassure the middle class that our needs will be taken care of, and win the vote of the middle class. By November 2020 those of us who identify as middle class, especially those of us who are middle class in Middle America, are likely to start thinking the world revolves around us.

It is times like election seasons that I am so grateful for the sacred stories from my faith tradition to remind me that actually, it’s not all about me. Much of Luke’s Gospel is filled with Jesus telling stories to his followers about two different groups of people: the extreme poor and the extreme wealthy. He doesn’t spend any time on the moderate middle class and our needs. This means that for those of us who find ourselves somewhere in the middle of these extremes,

or perhaps aspiring for the middle, we are left wondering where to place ourselves in these stories.

When we read today's story of the rich man and Lazarus, do we identify with the rich man who in life has everything he needs and more, but in death finds himself separate from God and unable to negotiate his way into getting what he wants? Or do we identify with poor Lazarus who suffers mightily in life, and finally experiences mercy and peace but only in death? Neither option is very good. Who wants to volunteer to suffer today even if it means something good happens later on? Although the lure of riches is tempting, who wants sign up to suffer after death?

These ideas of life and death are not supposed to send us into a deep discussion of what we believe about Heaven and eternity, but are used to help us, Jesus' followers, look from one extreme to the other. Which end of the spectrum do we fall closer to? Are we in danger now or in danger later? And what can we do about it?

The story of the rich man and Lazarus points us to a third option - perhaps we should strive to be like the brothers of the rich man. When Lazarus dies and realizes that his love of money before anything else has caused him to be tormented in death, he wants to warn his brothers so that they don't succumb to a similar fate.

He attempts to use Lazarus to send his brothers a message. Clearly the rich man still doesn't get it. He turns to Lazarus because he assumes that even in death, he is better than him and that poor Lazarus only exists to serve him. We know that Lazarus is a human being deserving of the same food and resources that the rich man had. This is why we know his name - Lazarus is a person with an identity and with needs in his own right. But the rich man doesn't see that. He only sees what he can get from Lazarus.

But the rich man is told he can't use Lazarus in this way and that if he brothers want a warning, they only have to look to the example of Moses and the prophets, those people who turned toward God with their questions and trusted in God's vision for justice for all people.

If we are the brothers, this means that this story serves as our warning, as our call to reevaluate the direction our life is headed and where we are placing our trust. This is true whether we are middle class who dreams of riches or whether our bank account is perpetually empty. If we've been told money will solve our problems, and if we secretly have a plan for what we will do when we win the lottery, this story serves as a reminder that money isn't the secret to a meaningful life. Do we feel most satisfied when our bank account is full or does that feeling come from doing an act of kindness for someone else? Do we exploit those who are poorer than us to get what we need to be comfortable, or do we turn first to God knowing that comfort is found in a strong Spirit?

We aren't dead. Yet. There is time for us to evaluate our life and our priorities. There is time for us to look for a pile of cash, not to spend it, but to read the reminder printed on it that "In God We Trust." What does it look like if chasing our dreams meant committing deeper to living generously, to caring for each other, and to making sure all of us are taken care of?

This isn't to say that those of us who are a lot closer to Lazarus than the rich man are doing anything wrong or shameful by longing for enough resources to get by or by putting their energy and focus into moving from debt to sustainability. We know from this story that when poverty overwhelms us - when we are hungering for the scraps on another person's table - that too can keep us separate from God. Lazarus was not able to know peace until death. Lazarus was so concerned with surviving that he wasn't allowed the opportunity to thrive. That isn't God's desire for any one of us. Knowing there are enough resources for everyone to live equitably, I

believe God hopes that we will care for one another in ways that sustain all of our lives and our planet.

And so, this story serves as a reminder that in order for each person to find the balance between having enough material wealth and grounding ourselves in spiritual wealth, part of that balance means looking beyond our own needs and taking into account other people's needs. There is no individual balance because if one person suffers, sooner or later we will all suffer.

Maybe this is why Jesus spends so much time preaching and teaching about extreme poverty and extreme wealth. It's not that he believed those were the only two kinds of people. Maybe those lessons were just as much for the folks in the middle as they are for either end of the spectrum. Maybe those of us who find ourselves solidly in the middle class are called to be bridge builders - to lift up and support those with less than ourselves, and to turn to the most wealthy and powerful and use our resources to bring their attention to situations they are unable to see because they are so blinded by their riches.

Those of us who fall somewhere in the middle have the gift and responsibility of looking both ways and bringing folks together. We often hear about extremely rich people setting up charitable endowments or starting special funds to save this group of people or that endangered animal. What we hear about less is that the group of people giving the highest percentage of their income to charity is average people with median incomes, giving a little bit at a time, making a consistent difference in their communities and to organizations that they are passionate about. It's not the richest among us that will care for the poor, it's everyone else, working together to give generously and care for their neighbors.

My favorite example of this is from a church called Circle of Hope in Philadelphia. This summer Sojourners Magazine did a story on a ministry Circle of Hope has been committed to for

the last ten years. They recognized that financial debt was a huge issue for people across the generations in their church, and they decided to work together to do something about it. Folks who did not carry debt worked together to create a seed fund and then, according to church member Joshua Grace, this is what happened:

“We identified church members with credit card debt and an income. We established three cohorts with a half dozen participants in each. Each member covenanted to 100-percent financial transparency within their cohort, to meet monthly with the group and with their financial coach, and to stop using credit cards. Each cohort started with seed money and a three-year payoff plan to bring the whole cohort out of credit card debt.

We discerned an order of debt annihilation. Usually the card with the highest interest rate, among all the cohort members, was paid off first. We paid off one line of credit at a time, working down the list.

The biggest impact was made on the first day, when the seed money paid off the most problematic cards. As we worked down the list, each participant made their own minimum payment, if they still had a balance, and also paid \$50 to \$100 more to the credit card of focus, regardless of who had that card. Members actually wrote checks to someone else’s lender with that person’s name and account number in the memo line.

After someone’s credit debt was annihilated, they kept paying in the same order. The amount that formerly went to their own minimum got added to their third-party check each month and sent to the specific lender. And thus, the snowball grew. The size of the concentrated payments increased as each card got paid off. When, together, we paid off all the balances, the seed money was replenished and passed on to the next group.”

WOW! This story has stayed with me for months now. What a tremendous amount of trust it took to do this as a church. Trust to be vulnerable and honest about the debt some folks carried. Trust to give generously to start the seed money that would be used to benefit someone else in the community. Trust that everyone in the cohort would commit to helping each other, even after they had personally benefited. Trust that by working together and committing to generosity they could end the cycle of debt and financial isolation. Trust that the folks in the middle would compel the rich man and his brothers to finally care for the Lazarus's amongst them.

I believe this kind of creative, generous, commitment is what Jesus is calling us to when he urges to us listen to Moses and the prophets; when he compels us to stop hoarding our own wealth at the expense of others; when he urges us to put our trust in God's justice and radical love in our actions, in our dreams, and in our communities.

It's not just about the rich man being doomed. It's not just about saving Lazarus. It's about all of us, working together to write a new narrative that tells the world "in God we trust."