

“WIDER IN OUR GENEROSITY”

By Rev. Victor Kim

Luke 16:19-31

(09-27-19)

I wonder how many of you would know who Alex Biega is?

Biega is a hockey player; he's a defenseman for the Vancouver Canucks and he holds the distinction of being the lowest paid player on the team. Actually, he's one of 52 players in the NHL who are making the minimum salary. But before you get too choked up for Alex, you should know that that minimum salary in the NHL is \$700,000. Biega makes more than double what the Prime Minister gets paid in total compensation and 3 ½ times what the Premier of B.C. makes. Maybe you got him mixed up with Alex Edler, who also plays for the Canucks and is the highest paid player on the team making \$7,000,000 a year.

So, what's my point?

That NHL hockey players are overpaid, and maybe some politicians as well? I don't think you need me to tell you that. What I'm getting at is that for many of us, especially for us here in the western world, in Canada, in this wonderfully desirable area of Metro Vancouver, for many of us the talk of money, and large amounts of it, is something that is becoming so commonplace that we don't even flinch at the figures anymore. **This ought to make us stop and think, think really hard about the kind of society we have become.**

We've heard in the reading from 1 Timothy that the love of money, not money in and of itself, is a root of all kinds of evil. It's not our money; it's what we do **with** our money, or **for** our money, that can engage us in evil, that can pierce ourselves

with many pains. **But is wealth a barrier to knowing God?** Again, the answer isn't wealth itself, but in our **response** to wealth. We heard Jesus in our reading from Luke's gospel last week warning those who would want to follow him that, **no one can serve two masters, for a slave will hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth, says Jesus.**

Upon hearing this the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, ridiculed Jesus. So, Jesus said to them, **you are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others, but God knows your hearts, for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God.**

Note Jesus doesn't say you cannot serve God **and be wealthy**, what he says is you can't **serve God and wealth. Wealth, for those who choose to serve it, is a great barrier to knowing the saving grace of God.**

To further emphasize his point, Jesus tells the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, our reading from the gospel of Luke this morning. There was a rich man who lived very well and a poor man, named Lazarus, who lay at the rich man's gate. The rich man was very rich, probably much more so than our nearly destitute hockey players making the league minimum. In Jesus' parable the rich man dressed in purple and in fine linen. Purple was a colour of dye which was hard to produce in those days and was very expensive and the fine linen Jesus speaks of refers to a type of special Egyptian made underwear.

Designer underwear!

You talk about wealth, this man had it all! And he was quite the gourmet as well. Jesus tells us that he feasted sumptuously every day. Lazarus, however, was very poor, so poor that he lay at the rich man's gate, covered with sores that were licked by the dogs, so hungry that he longed, not for a meal, but just for the scraps that would fall from the rich man's table. In time the poor man died. His body was probably swept aside and dumped in some unmarked hole in the ground. **But his soul was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham in heaven.**

The rich man also died in time. There was a burial, no doubt a lavish one, with all the oils and spices. His body would have been placed in a freshly prepared, previously unused tomb. **But his soul ended up in hell.**

It's a pretty harsh parable that Jesus tells, isn't it?

Upon hearing this parable for the first time one might be forgiven for asking, **what did the rich man do, and what did Lazarus do, to deserve this reversal of fortune?**

The parable doesn't say that the man mistreated Lazarus, or that Lazarus was anything more than a poor man. He wasn't a saint, who had become poor because he gave away all his wealth. There seems to be no interaction between the two men, other than the fact that they shared the same driveway.

Who knows, maybe the rich man even made sure that Lazarus did get the scraps from his table. Considering where the table the scraps came from it may have made more of a meal for Lazarus than many other people got in their homes.

Does the rich man end up in hell just for being wealthy and does the poor man end up in heaven just for being poor? And if that is the truth of Jesus' parable, what are all of us going to do?

There's a website called the Global Rich List, where you type in your annual income and it compares it to the rest of the people in the world. Now, if you put me next to Alex Biega or especially Alex Edler, I don't fare all that well. But you should know that my income puts me in the top 0.1% of the richest people on the planet. In terms of the global population, I'm not a one percenter, I'm a 0.1 percenter, the most elite that there is. It would take the average labourer in Indonesia 98 years to earn what I earn annually. My salary would pay for 276 doctors in a place like Kazakhstan. More than 6.75 billion people in the world are poorer than me.

Does that then condemn me and many of us here to an eternity apart from God?

This parable, like all of Jesus' parables, isn't that simple.

Jesus says that when the rich man died, he saw Lazarus by Abraham's side. And he called out, Father Abraham, have mercy on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue for I am in agony in these flames.

Abraham responds, sorry, you received your good things during your lifetime and Lazarus in like manner evil things, but now **he** is comforted here and **you** are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so and no one can cross from there to us. **Can't get there from here, is in effect what Abraham says to the rich man.**

We can note a few things from this conversation between the rich man and Abraham. Jesus clearly intends for us to understand that the rich man knew Lazarus.

He calls Lazarus by his name.

But it is also clear that even though he knew his name, the rich man did not treat Lazarus as a human being. Although the rich man knew his name and walked past him every day, Lazarus died outside his gates. Even in the afterlife, the rich man sees someone like Lazarus merely as a tool for his use. Sure, he has a great deal of respect for Father Abraham, asking him to show mercy, but Lazarus is still just an errand boy who the rich man wants Abraham to send to him with some water.

Jesus intends the rich man's words to betray his character.

And because he wasn't just a benign rich man, because he knew Lazarus and didn't do anything to change his situation, because he didn't act when he received his good things, now there is a great chasm between him and Lazarus.

But here's the catch, who created the chasm?

It was the rich man himself. Yes, according to the parable Jesus told, the chasm is a condition of hell, but that chasm is also a condition which too many of us set up here on earth between those in power, those with wealth, and those without power, those who are poor.

Why is it that 30 years ago the people who lived in the richest countries were on average 30 times better off than those who lived in the poorest countries, but now those same people are more than 100 times better off than our poorest brothers and sisters? **Part of the answer is that those who have the wealth, those who have the power too often also create and maintain a chasm that continues to separate the rich from the poor, that makes it harder and harder for the poor to get out of poverty.** The rich man and Lazarus might have been separated only by a gate, but that gate may as well have been as wide and deep as the Grand Canyon.

We who are wealthy do create chasms that separate those who can afford it from those who can't. **Maybe we don't do it deliberately but the truth is that much of what we don't do when it comes to decisions of economy fall into the sins of omission category.**

Like the rich man in Jesus' parable, **we are indifferent to a system that creates and propagates the chasm of imbalance between the very rich and the very poor.**

We are indifferent because it works for us. We aren't motivated to change anything because the system serves us pretty well. While the gap is profound on a global level, locally it's much the same. There's a strike going on in the hotel services industry, including the iconic Hotel Georgia in downtown Vancouver.

The workers claim that in a time of record profits for the hospitality industry many workers are struggling to make ends meet due to unpredictable shifts because hotels are cutting hours and increasing workload levels. I'm sure the issue is more complicated than what I read in the papers, but the question remains, if the system continues to widen the chasm of imbalance between the those who have very much and those who don't have much at all, is it sustainable, is it just?

I remember before I came out here to Richmond that the Session of my former congregation in Calgary wrestled with the idea of a living wage. This was before the last NDP government of Alberta made a pledge to raise the minimum wage in Alberta to \$15/hr. The church employed a number of part time security people who were being paid the minimum wage, which was at that time around \$12/hr. Studies showed that the living wage that would allow a person or a household to meet basic needs like food, housing, utilities, transportation and clothing was

\$15/hr. which didn't include things like credit card or loan payments, savings for retirement or children's education or any additional medical costs or holidays.

The Session had a long discussion around this, wondering about the implications of adopting the recommendation. It also raised the question that as the living wage increased, which might be at a faster pace than the actual minimum wage; would the church be prepared to follow the living wage recommendations on an ongoing basis? Eventually the Session agreed to implement the recommendation to pay all the church staff at least the living wage minimum. It wasn't a huge hit in terms of church finances, but it made a difference to the people who needed it the most.

In Metro Vancouver, the living wage is \$19.50/hr., according to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, which is actually almost \$1.50/hr. lower than it was in 2018 but the current minimum wage in B.C. is \$13.85/hr.

How do we address the growing chasm between those who have much and those who have little? Or do we want to address it at all?

Each time we make a decision to maintain the economic imbalance between the haves and the have-nots, we dig a bigger hole in the chasm and we make it that much harder for the have-nots to find their way out.

Each time we fail to change what we can change for the sake of those who haven't been as blessed as we have been, we dig that chasm just a bit deeper and a bit wider. And what we dig doesn't only apply here; we take it with us to the life to come **when the tables may very well be turned on us.**

I know that for some of us the eyes are starting to gloss over because the problems seem so staggering. There is a disconnect for many of us because the issue of poverty and economic inequality seems so large and so pervasive. We think, I can't

make a dent in the economic situation of 7 billion people, never mind the homeless people in our city! What am I compared to the policies of national governments, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund?

Maybe you saw this week the speech the 16 year old Swedish activist, Greta Thunberg gave at the United Nations about climate change. It wasn't so much of a speech as it was a scolding. To some she is a prophet, uncomfortably calling us to action on an issue of global importance to others she's a puppet being manipulated by others for their agenda. But she makes you think about the issue of climate change, as we should. This past Friday, there were about 100,000 people in Vancouver who took part in the Global Climate Strike and more than 300,000 people attended the strike in Montreal where Thunberg spoke to the gathering.

Again, we might argue that the issue is so big, what can I do about it?

How will my actions make any difference? Some argue that Canada contributes less than 2% of the global CO₂ emissions and that nothing we do would make any measurable difference, especially if you consider that countries like China, the US and India account for over 50% of the emissions globally. But others argue that when it comes to per capita figures, Canada does very poorly, coming in much higher per person than China or India and roughly the same as the US. In terms of per capita emissions, Canada ranks close to the very top of the list. Whatever your feelings may be about the issue of climate change, whether you think it's the defining crisis of our time or that it's just a huge waste of energy which will cost us our hard earned money, the point is that the stewardship of our planet, of God's creation, is absolutely an issue which has to be at the heart of what it means to be

disciples of Jesus. And it is a huge and difficult issue.

Are we hopeless then, is our situation hopeless?

Not at all.

Is Jesus telling this parable because he wants to reform the Jewish economic system of his time or because he wants us to create a world in which equality of outcome is guaranteed for everyone? **I don't think so.**

There will come a time when those who have suffered will know the grace and mercy of God. And there will come a time when those who have had the chance to do good with the blessings of their lives and **have not done so** will know the judgment of God.

The reason Jesus tells the parable is so that those of us **who can, will do** something about the Lazarus' on our doorsteps. Jesus doesn't tell the parable because he wants to change the global, political or economic system of the day. **He is interested in changing our hearts.**

The rich man does not know God's judgment because he failed to change the economic system of his time; he knows God's judgment **because he failed Lazarus.** Wealth in and of itself is not evil. **Evil begins when we replace the pursuit of God with the pursuit of wealth.** Jesus tells the parable because **he wants us to get it.** He wants us to hear his warning and not find ourselves in the situation of the rich man.

Going wide with the world means going wider in our generosity.

Last week I spoke about going deeper than our stuff, that our worldly wealth needs to be invested in things that create eternal outcomes. The Apostle Paul writing to

his disciple Timothy says that there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment, **for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it.** Eugene Peterson in the Message translates the last part of our text from 1 Tim this way.

*“Tell those rich in this world’s wealth to quit being so full of themselves and so obsessed with money, which is here today and gone tomorrow. Tell them to go after God, who piles on all the riches we could ever manage—to do good, to be rich in helping others, to be extravagantly generous. If they do that, they’ll build a treasury that will last, **gaining life that is truly life.**”*

Whether it’s the issue of economic inequality or climate change, if we think that the scope is just too big, that we can’t make a difference, **if we do nothing, if we change nothing, then nothing will change.** So, let us make the decision and commitment to change **just one thing** about what we do and how we live. Change **just one thing** about how we can go wider in our generosity; **identify just one person** who might benefit from our help, our goodness, from our building something that will last.

How many times have we heard a sermon and thought, that’s a good point, and done nothing about it? **If we change nothing, nothing will change.**

What would make us actually act? Are we waiting for some special sign, for some unique revelation? Do we want to make sure that it’s God who is speaking to us? **But as Jesus says, if we do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will we be convinced even if someone rises from the dead!**

What more do we need before we act?

There's nothing more God can show us, we just have to start acting.

God, our God, the God of mercy and grace, invites us to use that which he has given us, to fill in the chasms, to bridge the gaps, to go wider in our generosity, one thing at a time, one person at a time, and not to wait until it is too late.

We don't have to change the system; we just have to change one thing.

And as we change, one thing at a time, one person at a time, **we will change the world.**

Thanks be to God!

*Written by Rev. Victor Kim
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