

Are You Convinced?

September 28, 2025

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15

Luke 16:19-31

I can't know for sure, but I think that when Luke was assembling his gospel from the bits and pieces of Jesus stories he'd collected, one of those scrolls contained the three long stories that we only find in Luke: the Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan, and the Rich Man and Lazarus. I'm probably wrong, but these stories are longer than most, take more time to develop character than most, and have really pointed endings.

A story which ends with the faithful brother reprimanded for his faithfulness? That's pretty surprising. A story which ends with absolutely the wrong hero? That's quite a challenge. A story which says, "Give to the poor or go to Hades?"

They don't get much more pointed than that.

It's also counterintuitive in the first century and in the twenty-first century. As Kendra A. Mohn writes at Working Preacher, "It is common to equate wealth with virtue, whether today or in the ancient world. Good people who work hard and live righteously can expect to be rewarded with means; likewise, people with means are seen as good (smart, hardworking, righteous) because they were able to acquire wealth. In the ancient world, concepts like wealth, virtue, and masculinity worked together and reinforced one another to solidify elite status.

"The idea that the rich man is a good man is directly challenged by Jesus' parable."

We tend to assume that at least reasonable economic success comes from the virtues of hard work and good choices. There's a lot of truth to that. I'm not sure if many of you know that I established and ran a consulting business for quite a few years. I really only closed it when one of my clients – the Connecticut Conference of the UCC – asked me to give them full time and I got taken on as a staff member. I've got some experience with the kind of initiative, creativity, inquiry, and ongoing effort it takes to make that kind of thing work.

Mind you, I don't say that to claim those virtues. I just know they're needed. As you might have noticed, my efforts as a business owner did not bring me substantial amounts of wealth.

In these three long parables found in Luke, Jesus emphasized some rather different values. In the Prodigal Son, the virtue of forgiveness. In the Good Samaritan, the virtue of compassion. In the Rich Man and Lazarus, the virtue of generosity. None of those are, I hasten to mention, incompatible with the virtues of hard work, diligence, and discernment, although I've heard

people say that they are. These are the ones who say that empathy is a weakness, even the fundamental weakness of Western civilization.

All right. If you don't want to call it empathy, don't. Empathy describes a feeling, and as I say a lot, feelings aren't things we control. We feel feelings.

But we act compassionately. We extend forgiveness. We give generously.

Or, I suppose, we don't. But those are the virtues Jesus lifted up in these longer stories.

Now, how many of you are big fans of the story of The Prodigal Son? It can be a little rough on us older brother types – for the record, I am the older brother in my family, though I think my brother has had to forgive me more often than I've had to forgive him – but the ending leaves us in a place where we anticipate the reunion of the family.

How about The Good Samaritan? Who's a fan? Those of us in the religious professions can certainly have a rough time with it, but let's face it. There's a part of our culture which enjoys the triumph, especially the moral triumph, of the outsider. So hooray for the Samaritan!

And we didn't expect that much of the religious officials anyway.

The Prodigal Son. The Good Samaritan. Good stories. Well known. Well remembered. Quoted from time to time, even.

When was the last time you quoted The Rich Man and Lazarus?

Well, I haven't either.

Maybe it's a bit too close to home. John T. Carroll writes at Working Preacher, "An enormous and growing wealth gap separates a few—both individuals and nations—from the many who live in poverty. Sound familiar? First-century life within the Roman Empire was much like the reality we know, in this regard. The Gospel of Luke assumes and addresses this reality." And as Cheryl Lindsay writes at UCC.org, "Preservation of the comfort of the privileged allows more injustice to occur than pure evil. At no point does the story suggest the rich man caused Lazarus to suffer initially. Yet, his inaction allowed it to continue. As Martin Luther King, Jr. declared, 'In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.'"

Maybe it's a bit too close to home because we know that the virtue of generosity is one of the hardest. There's a lot of risk to generosity.

We fear that if we give too much, we won't have enough. Right? That comes in the big decisions, when we're choosing how much to contribute in the year to things we support, and it also comes in the smaller decisions, when we're deciding whether there's enough in our wallet to give something to the panhandler on the sidewalk.

How much do we need to keep to maintain our lives? It's a hard question, in the moment and in the long term. Speaking for myself, I tend to decide that what I need is probably more than what I really need. Anyone else feel the same?

There's another risk to generosity, and I fear it and I hear it all the time. Will the person I'm generous to be properly grateful? Remember the story of Jesus and the ten people he healed from leprosy. Only one came back to say thank you – and it was a Samaritan. I'd rather not be generous if I don't get a thank you.

So I'd guess that Jesus didn't heal anyone again... Oh, right. He did.

Generosity isn't about the people we give to. It's about us. We decide. We reach out. We give – or not. Gratitude is an important part of generosity, but to be frank, it isn't necessary for generosity to happen. If you have any doubt about that, think about God's incredibly generous gift to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Have you fully expressed your gratitude for that? Is it actually possible to give adequate thanks for that?

In this parable, Jesus stressed not just the importance of compassionate giving, he emphasized its urgency. Debie Thomas writes at JourneyWithJesus.net, "...what I appreciate most is that it's an urgent story. It doesn't mince words about what's at stake. It doesn't pretend that our years are limitless and our options infinite. This is a story about time running out. About alternatives closing down. This is a story for us."

We get to be generous here and now. Instead of "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we may die," Jesus asked us to be compassionate and generous, for tomorrow we may die.

Melissa Bane Sevier writes at her blog, "No matter our social and financial status, we all have responsibility for the other. A cautionary tale, this parable pushes us to see and hear the suffering of the poor and to cross that enormous gulf that exists between people, between communities. To see the poor and the sick as people with names, not just some jumble of faces. To name the injustices and illnesses they deal with. To reach out while we're all still living, because it is the only chance we have to try and make things right."

Did you notice the other major difference in this parable between the rich man and Lazarus? Jesus gave the poor man a name – relatively few of the characters in his stories got names – and the rich man didn't. Mind you, the name was carefully chosen. "Lazarus" is a version of the Hebrew "Eliezar," which means, "God is my help."

God is my help.

In this story, that turned out to be true. God was the only help for Lazarus.

In our reality, we cannot let that be true. We must be part of the help for the Lazaruses of the world. God is their help, but we can be and must be part of that help.

It's important. It's Jesus' summons. It's urgent.

Are you convinced?

Amen.

by Eric Anderson