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Proper 21C, Pentecost 19 - September 25, 2016

Well, if last week's Gospel about the dishonest steward was confusing, this one is blatantly clear - if the focus of your life is on living extravagantly and not on serving others, you will suffer painful consequences. This parable contains one of the few mentions in New Testament of Hades or Hell. And it's easy to focus on this - "if you're miserly rich person, you'll end up in Hell," whatever that is. But, this parable isn't just about the afterlife, but is also about our lives right now. Jesus was trying to direct our attention to the cause of selfishness and greed, how that affects us in the present, and how we might repent.

In Luke, Jesus focuses a lot on the proper use of wealth; we're inundated with examples throughout the Gospel of Luke and Acts. But, Luke also focused on separation and connection. He showed Jesus reaching out to those on the fringes - sinners, the poor, Gentiles, women. Several parables in Luke are about connection or reconnection with those on who were outsiders or disconnected - the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son are good examples.

So, perhaps the rich man's real problem in today's Gospel wasn't stinginess, but separation - he was so separated from God, from the true source of his blessings, and from his fellow human beings that he was blind to the needs of Lazarus. In the parable he was "dressed in purple and fine linen and... feasted sumptuously." Clearly he enjoyed the trappings of his wealth. He even had a gate to protect his belongings and keep the riff-raff out. It's not hard to see how the rich man could be disconnected with God and his fellow human beings when he was so isolated in his world of pleasure and comfort. What need did he have of God? This was a very big problem in Jesus' time. The separation between rich and poor was huge. The wealthy profited directly from the misery of the poor. They built great palaces and fortresses that ate up the raw materials and labor from the surrounding area. The poor were taxed out of their homes and lands to subsidize these projects and to repay the

Roman Empire for the trouble of protecting the rich and powerful. And, the rich felt no obligation to the poor. Conventional belief was the poor somehow deserved their plight or it was God's will that they suffer. And is it so different now? Don't we have many brazen examples of ostentatious wealth, conspicuous consumption, and contempt for the poor and needy, treating God's creation - resources and people - as objects to be exploited rather than blessings to be shared. We don't have to look far in our culture to see what's valued and what isn't. We celebrate power, wealth, and all the trappings...the bigger, and louder, and gaudier the better.

But, the real problem here is not wealth and possessions. In Paul today we are reminded that it is God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. No, the problem, if we are to listen to Jesus and to the Law and the Prophets, is seeing wealth and possessions as objects to be pursued and held for their own value, and not as blessings and tools to be used to do God's will. When we see possessions as objects for our personal use and pleasure, it's not very long before we begin see people in the same way...as either be useful or worthless. This separates us from the true source of all - God. And, it isn't only the rich who can succumb to this temptation. We can all easily train our focus on things rather than on God. The rich man in today's parable was damned not just in afterlife; his earthly life was damned as well because he failed to live in connection to God and creation. He was disconnected from God and others, and saw himself as separate. He didn't have any regard for suffering Lazarus, because Lazarus could be of no use to him. And this attitude continued in the afterlife. Even in suffering the rich man didn't speak to Lazarus directly, but bid Abraham to send Lazarus to attend to him. How disconnected! How Arrogant! The great chasm that Abraham referred to was not just in Hades, it was the chasm that the rich man himself created in life, separating him from his fellow human beings. I'm reminded of the ghost of Jacob Marley, "I wear the chain I forged in life. I made it link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it on of my own free will, and of my own free will I wore it." Those who choose to live their lives in separation, seeing wealth and possessions as objects to be hoarded, and people not as fellow members of the body of Christ, but as separate from them, create their own chasms, and their own chains.

While they might enjoy their possessions, they have no part in the wonders of life eternal, they're unable to experience the richness of God's abundant love. What occurs for them in the afterlife is only an extension of the life lived here and now.

My brothers and sisters, Jesus came to teach us that there is no separation between us and God, between one another, and between us and Creation We are all one in God through Christ Jesus, and our joy is living into this reality. Our eternal life exists in our ability to recognize this great truth of our Oneness. Let us heed Paul, and "pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness...and if we fight the good fight of the faith...then we take hold of the eternal life, to which we were called, now and forever. Amen.