

Sixteenth Sunday in Pentecost, September 28, 2025.

St. Michael's Church

The Rev. Joshua Wong

Gospel reading: Luke 16: 19-31

Focus: How do we care for those in need around us?

Function: I am preaching this sermon to my parishioners to say that we need to be aware of how we use our worldly wealth.

Let us pray:

Everlasting God, you have ordained and constituted in a wonderful order the ministries of angels and mortals: Mercifully grant that, as your holy angels always serve and worship you in heaven, so by your appointment they may help and defend us here on earth. Amen.

Tomorrow is the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels, also known as Michaelmas. Celebrated every year on September 29 by the Western Christian Church, the day honors the Archangel Michael and all other angels as God's messengers, guardians, and agents of his will. We will be posting additional reflections about this Feast day on our website under the tab "sermons."

Many of you may know the Prayer of St. Michael's, it goes: "Saint Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle; be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the devil. May God rebuke him, we humbly pray. And do thou, O Prince of the heavenly host, by the power of God, thrust into hell Satan and all the evil spirits who prowl about the world, seeking the ruin of souls. Amen".

This prayer was written to St. Michael by Pope Leo XIII in 1884 after he had a vision during mass. Although the wording may feel strident, I feel this prayer has

relevancy today. There seems to us many evil powers that prowl about the world today including the inequality between the rich and the poor.

Hardly a day goes by when our news does not mention the growing gap between the rich and poor. There maybe disagreements about the causes, consequences, and solutions of radical inequality, but the reality of it is undeniable.

Pulitzer Prize-winning author Hedrick Smith argues that in the last thirty years we have become two Americas. A "gross inequality of income and wealth" has demolished the middle class dream. A clear example is how difficult it is for full time workers to afford buying a house on their salary without the help of a family member. This wasn't inevitable, Smith says, it's not the result of "impersonal and irresistible market forces," rather, it's the consequence of government policies and corporate strategies.

Joseph Stiglitz, a Nobel Prize-winner and former chief economist for the World Bank, comes to similar conclusions in his book entitled, *The Price of Inequality: How Today's Divided Society Endangers Our Future*. He writes that in 2010, "The top 1 percent of Americans gained 93 percent of the additional income created in the country compared to a year earlier." Like Smith, he says that this didn't have to happen.

The problems are worse in the rest of the world. According to the World Bank, in 2010, 2.4 billion people lived on less than \$2 a day. These folks could live

for two days on one of my Blue Butterfly latte. They suffer the catastrophic consequences of poverty— access to safe and dependable water, low life expectancy, high infant and maternal mortality, low literacy, and so on.

This was the case in today's Gospel story. Luke's Gospel for this week describes the economic disparity between an unnamed rich man and a beggar named Lazarus (not to be confused with the brother of Mary and Martha). The rich man later became known as "Dives," which is Latin for "rich man" that Jerome used in his late fourth-century translation of the Bible.

The story begins with the words, "there was a rich man." This is exactly how the previous parable last week began in Luke 16 about the Shrewd Manager: "There was a rich man." Jesus didn't hesitate to use money as a measure of our spiritual health.

The first parable is told from the perspective of the rich manager, and ends with a warning to people who "loved money" that "you cannot serve God and Mammon." This week's story takes the vantage point of the poor Lazarus, and ends with a radical reversal of fortunes.

Dives dressed in the finest clothes. He ate the best food. Luke says that he "lived in luxury every day." And every day he actively ignored the poor man at his

gate. Lazarus was chronically hungry. He wore rags. He was covered with lesions. And the dogs licked his sores.

Then death came to both men, as it will to each one of us. In the afterlife, Lazarus found comfort while the rich man suffered torment, agony and regret.

In life, Lazarus begged the rich man for help. In the afterlife, it was the rich man who begged Lazarus for mercy on both himself and his family that was still alive. But it was too late. What was done was done.

As in life, now in death, a huge gulf separated the two men. Luke describes a "great chasm" between Lazarus and Dives, only now their fortunes had flipped.

Whether you read this as a parable or a literal description of the afterlife, the point is the same. Jesus warns us that our time on earth is short. Our opportunities to serve the poor don't last forever. So we may ask ourselves, Do we build gates around us so we don't need to see the needs of the poor and helpless? Jesus is warning us that our economic choices shape our deepest identities and our eternal destinies. The tragic realization of Scrooge in Charles Dickens's "Christmas Carol" comes to mind: "These are the chains I forged in life."

But tragedy isn't a necessity. This week's Epistle reminds us that by sharing generously and being rich in good deeds, we "lay up treasure for ourselves as a firm foundation for the coming age," and "take hold of the life that is truly life."

In this scripture, money is not the problem. Money is neutral in itself; it's simply a means to facilitate commerce and trade in our daily lives. Having money is also not the problem: there are many examples, particularly in the Hebrew Scriptures, of people who considered their wealth a gift from God, and used their wealth to help and benefit others. It's not money itself, but Jesus warns us that the ***love of money*** is what poses a dangerous threat. There were and still are many good examples of generous wealthy people in the Bible and in our community. For example, thank God for the wealthy women who supported Jesus (Luke 8:2–3), for the rich man Joseph of Arimathea who tenderly buried Jesus in his own tomb, and for all the wealthy saints today who follow their footsteps. I know many generous folks in our own diocese who give their time, treasure and talent to the church. There are many who bequeathed their wealth after their passing to the church.

Here in 1 Timothy, Paul is criticizing a group of what he calls “*false teachers*” whose “*love of money*” taints and motivates their behavior and teaching. They are supposedly teaching the Christian faith, but they are doing so for their own personal gain. They are more interested in *profits* than in *people*. For these people, the desire for wealth leads into “senseless and harmful desires,” the author writes. Such people have “pierced themselves with many pains.”

There are no easy answers to the hard sayings of Jesus about money. There are different ways believers grappled with parables like Lazarus and Dives.

No matter how the Holy Spirit enlightens your understanding of generosity, we should freely share not out of guilt, instead, pattern our lives after the generous God who is the source of all life, and who graciously provides all that we need. Devote ourselves, not to the acquisition of greater wealth, but to the advancement of God's kingdom.

By serving the poor, we care for our own souls by imitating the character of God himself. Only in heaven, said Mother Theresa, will we understand how much we owe the poor for helping us to love God like we should.

Today's story has many open ended questions. The rich man was not pictured as particularly evil by the standards of this age, but as living as the well-to-do customarily do, admired and envied by all. Nor is Lazarus described as particularly virtuous. The only point of the story is the eschatological reversal: the ultimate verdict and situation brought about by the coming kingdom will be a reversal of the present world. We need to decide on our own whether to live by the standards already in place in this world, or by the coming reversal manifest in Jesus.

The general message of this parable is quite clear in its Lukan context: how one uses one's earthly resources is terribly important, for there are consequences for neglecting the condition of the poor and hungry.

The parable provokes many thoughts for us. I'm pretty sure that none of us would neglect a sick, starving beggar on our doorstep. But how far away must the person be before we are "no longer responsible?" Across the parking lot, down the street, across town, across our country, or across the world? If other people should be responsible in those more distant places, am I relieved of my responsibility, so that as long as no starving people are on my personal doorstep, I may continue my feasting in good conscience, secure in my gated community?

In this story, rich and poor are divided by table and gates, but Luke knows that in the early church every person, no matter what your economic or social status is, are united around one table.

In our modern times, most of us have more than we need, how is God calling us to care for the huge disparity between the poor and those who have enough? 1 Timothy 6 says, "As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life."

Let us pray:

Father, we especially pray today for those who like Lazarus are ignored or neglected and left to suffer in our world; those who live in poverty within our cities around the world. Awaken us by your angels and compel our hearts with your message, to live with compassion, generosity and wisdom as children of God. Amen.