

Only a few of my Thinksheets are sermons. The church in which I preached this sermon today requests that the preacher provide a printed text for future distribution, so why not a Thinksheet?....Loree was the liturgist & read the 2nd & 3rd ecumenical lections (Ps.107.1,33-43 & 1Tim.6.6-19), & I read the 1st & 4th (Joel 2.21-32 & L.16.19-31). The biblical text of the sermon was the 4th lection, which I paraphrased from the Greek as follows:

A certain rich man every day clothed himself in purple & fine linens & primped his appearance. Heas carefully chose his cuisine, pampering his stomach. Living inside his walls with the greatest luxury, he never noticed that every day outside his rear gate there lay a poor cripple. Or even if he did glance at him occasionally, he wasn't interested enough to ascertain that the poor man's name was Eleazar (in Greek, "Lazarus").

Now Lazarus, his skin full of sores, was so utterly dependent & destitute that he survived only by having pitying neighbors put him day by day at the rich man's back gate, the gate the garbage was daily carried through, the kitchen slave pausing long enough for the cripple to pick it over. Of course the dogs, too, knew that that was the right gate to go to to scrounge for food; & getting there before the garbage came out, they would lick Lazarus' sores, always thirsty as they were in that land of summer-scarce water. Furthermore, the rich man was so stingy that he half starved his staff, so the garbage pickings by the time they got to Lazarus weren't all that good; and between that fact & the dogs, who were quicker than the cripple, Lazarus never got himself a full belly of scraps; so each day he was carried home with a stomach still asking for more. As for a square meal--since he was born a cripple, he had about as much notion of a square meal as a child born blind has of light.

Now, in the ordinary course of events, Lazarus died and was--extradordinarily!--carried away by angels & seated at Abraham's right hand, his very bosom, the place of honor in a heavenly banquet such as he used to dream of! He had known it was to be like this at the end of the age, the messianic feast, but here it was real already at the mere end of his life! "The beatitude is already fulfilled," he said to himself; "I am the poor, & I have already inherited the kingdom of heaven."

Also in the ordinary course of events, the rich man died, and was buried. From his torment in Hades he looked up & saw Abraham a long way off & Lazarus in his bosom, at his right side, the place of honor! So he cried out, "Father Abraham! Pity me & send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water & cool my tongue, for I am tormented in these flames!" But Abraham, role-playing the rich man's insensitivity, was unmoved. "My son," he said, "remember that during your lifetime you got the good things & Lazarus the bad; success came your way & failure his. Now he's taking it easy & you have it tough; he's being comforted while you are in agony. And that's not all: between us & you there's a deep ditch; anybody wanting to get from here to you can't, nor can anybody from your side cross over to us."

"Then," said the rich man, "Father, I beg you to send Lazarus to my father's house, to my five brothers, so he can warn them, telling them the whole truth about their condition & danger, so they'll repent & not wind up in the misery I'm in!"

Abraham shrugged & said, "They have the Bible--Moses & the Prophets; let them listen to that." "Ah no, Father Abraham," replied the rich man, "the Bible will never change them, they don't pay that much attention to it; but if someone were to come to them from the dead, they'd repent."

Coolly, Abraham cut him off: "If they are deaf to the word of God, they'd be blind to a resurrection. If they will not listen to the Bible, they'd not be convinced even if someone they knew to be dead were to reappear to them alive."

This is one of our Lord's reversal-of-fortune stories. It's unsparing, the reversal absolute. One guy is up &--whoops!--comes the judgment & he's down; another guy's down &--whoops!--comes the judgment & he's up. "The first shall

be last," says Jesus in a saying parallel to this parable, "& the last first." This was truly upsetting thinking. Literally upsetting. One picture we have for this is the half turn of the wheel: when a wheel makes a half turn, its top & bottom exchange places. The Romans had a word for it, "re-volutio." And the Romans killed Jesus because it looked to them as though he might trigger a Jewish revolution against Caesar. Indeed, later his disciples were accused of turning the world upside down.

Now, as I make **seven observations** about this parable, observations of how it seems pertinent to our lives today here in America & here in this community & church, I invite you to jot down, for meditation & prayer, the ones that seem to apply to you personally. For Jesus intends this story to be to you, to me, to us, a word of warning & wisdom, & thus also a word of hope that we shall better use our goodwill & goods for the good of our neighbors near & far, & thus for our own good in the world to come.

1 My first observation is that **what goes around comes around**. In the final analysis, which is a secular way of speaking of the final judgment, nobody gets away with anything. As current chaos-theory teaches us, our impressions of disorder & randomness arise from our failure to see the bigger picture. In the biggest picture, the order of nature & the order of justice are one order from & in the mind of the one God, one order including hurricanes, AIDS, droughts, earthquakes, tidal waves, the S&L debacle, junk bonds, & last week's international monetary turmoil reminding us of the high volatility & unreliability of money.

Looking at the small picture, some Psalmists cry out, "Lord, bad things are happening to good people! How come the wicked aren't getting theirs, & we're getting theirs instead?" Some of these Psalms incorporate this response: "Just you wait! In the bigger picture, the longer time-frame, you'll see that they do get theirs." What's troubling about this is that while they're getting theirs, we'll be getting ours--& what will ours be? Jesus' story directs our negative feelings about others to serious thoughts about ourselves--how we are living, & what is happening to us inwardly, & what will happen to us in the long run, in the larger picture.

2 So--this is my second observation--Jesus in this story is trying to **frighten** us into wisdom, into sane living in an insane world. Please don't get hung up on the picture language of the story, whether it's to be taken literally or not. Some things we can't take literally are truer than other things we can. To feel the meaning of the two-world, two-level picture, *see* it! See Father Abraham presiding at the heavenly banquet with an empty place on his right, the place of honor. Then see an angel conduct Lazarus to this seat! Lazarus without his rags & his sores, & his protruding ribs & hollow belly like the citizens of Somalia today! See the rich man without his expensive clothes, indeed without any clothes at all, & without his lavish food, indeed without any food at all or even water. See the fire the rich man is standing in, & the deep ditch forbidding crossing in either direction. Artists have painted the whole picture, putting in all the details; but we can do that for ourselves with the invisible brushes of our imagination. As for the social picture, we hardly need to use our imagination. In that country then, as in our country now, the topmost 1% of the population controlled half the wealth.

But why would Jesus want to frighten us? Because he knows our two hottest buttons are love & fear; & when he fails to get our attention by love, even by his love for us in dying on the cross to redeem us, he tries the other button. God is love, & love tries to frighten us into loving when pushing our love button doesn't get us into action.

3 A third observation: Our parable tells us that what we do with what we are & what we have is **serious** business, entailing irreversible, deep-ditch consequences. No other world-class spiritual leader ever preached the divine forgiveness as pervasively & persuasively as did Jesus; but he offered no cheap grace, no easy escape from getting what's coming to us if we don't repent & bring forth works bespeaking our repentance, our turning from squandering God's gifts

to using them for his glory & the good of our spiritually, emotionally, & materially needy neighbors at home & abroad, & the good of our fragile planet.

4 A fourth observation: The long run, the larger picture, includes a morally differentiated **afterlife**. The traditional question What's going to happen to me after I'm dead? has been, in our present culture, largely replaced by the question What's going to happen to me when I'm dying? Fear for most folks has shifted from the beginning of the afterlife to the ending of this life, an ending so often cruelly & stupidly stretched out by medicine's myopic focusing on keeping the physical body alive.

And for millions, the afterlife is now **amoral**, reflecting a no-fault view of this life, no afterlife consequences from one's behavior in this life. The lower level has disappeared; the rich man no longer has any hell to go to, so he snuggles up on Abraham's left side at the heavenly banquet. Pseudo-scientific articles & books on euphoric life-after-life experiences narrated by "returnees" naively leap from neurology to ontology, from "seeing a light" to living in the eternal light. Jesus would have nothing to do with such utopian, hedonistic claptrap. It makes nonsense of his cross, nonsense of the gospel, nonsense of a moral universe & the moral seriousness of human life here & now. For him, both God's righteousness (& therefore judgment) & his love (& therefore proffered forgiveness) pervade & inform the human condition before & after physical death.

The deepest root of the moral crisis in American society today is that for the multitudes the sense of life lived under God, under his righteous judgment & abounding love, has so withered that responsibility--to God, to family, to society, even to self--has been repressed into the unconscious. How return it to consciousness? A wise rabbi tried this: to a student of his he said, "Repent the day before you die." "But master," said the student, "How can I know which day that is?" "That's my point," replied the rabbi. The student's only hope was to repent, to humble himself before God, every day....I leave, for your own application, two more stories:

...Three days ago a counselee of mine cursed the current Nike sneaker ad, "LIFE IS SHORT. PLAY HARD." Said he, "My wife has been thinking about that, & she said to me, 'Yes, life is short, too short for me to spend the rest of it with you. I want a divorce.'"

...Four days ago I heard about a little girl whose cat died while she was at school. When the little girl got home, her mother, wanting to soften the blow, said, "Honey, Kitty has gone to heaven." The child, her eyes round with astonishment, cried out, "Mommy! What would God want with a dead cat?"

The wife was right at least in taking seriously that for us humans, time is indeed short. And the child was right to cut through her mother's sentimentality to the bottom-line fact that in the long run we're all dead: nobody's going to get out of this alive. And there's nothing automatic about a happy resurrection or heaven.

5 A fifth observation: In his radical, transforming story of Lazarus & the rich man, Jesus is telling us that how we use our money, our worldly goods, has **consequences** for both society & self--for justice, fairness, health in society, & for the health & destiny of the self here & hereafter. Our fourth ecumenical lection this morning is the close of L.16, the only NT chapter that's entirely about money. It follows the only NT chapter that's entirely about losses (a lost coin, a lost sheep, & a lost son). It's easy to see how Jesus' enemies could accuse him of being a party-goer. The coin is found & the woman throws a party. The sheep is found & the shepherd does what? He throws a party. The prodigal son is found & what does the father do? He (let's say it together) throws a party. Yes, Lazarus dies & what does Father Abraham do? He throws a party, a heavenly banquet that makes a somebody out of a nobody. Jesus our Lord loved parties & leaned toward laughter, & he's sad when we use our money, our goods, our resources, our lives in ways not worth his throwing a party for.

Think, now, how profoundly corrupted America's financial, social, & political life has become by the **misuse of money**. Then read the whole of L.16 &

ponder what Jesus says about money: (vs.9) "So use worldly wealth that when it's gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings"; (vs.13) "You cannot serve God & money"; (vs.15) "What people highly value is detestable in God's sight"; (vs.22) "The beggar died, & angels carried him to Abraham's side."

The Aug.24 WASHINGTON POST carried an article subtitled "What Malls and Materialism Are Doing to the Planet." The high-consumption American model with its ever-larger shopping-malls has become "the unifying ambition of our globalizing consumer culture," history's "most environmentally destructive way of life" when seen together with "rapid population growth." "Our social and economic culture has long been driven by discontent," urging us to shop till we drop. (By contrast, note that our third Bible reading this morning begins with the words "Religion makes you very rich if you are satisfied with what you have.") And there's a spiritual price to pay. As Wordsworth said 1½ cs. ago, "Getting and spending we lay waste our powers." Wanting goes up & so working must take more hours, so happiness & the sense of fulfilment from family, church, & leisure time goes down...."We visit shopping malls more often than we go to church, and 93% of teenage girls rank shopping their favorite activity. Malls have become the public squares of our public life," & brand names & chain stores "the icons of our popular culture....Americans consume close to their own weight in basic raw materials every day."

The sickness is self-inflicted by engineered & random **greed**, & the symbol of it all is the one word that forms this morning's sermon title, "MONEY." Sometime today read prayerfully today's four scriptures. Pause over vs.10 of the third one: "For the love of money is a source of all kinds of evil. Some have been so eager to have it that they have wandered away from the faith and have broken their hearts with many sorrows." Then fill your heart with riches as you meditate on the first verse of the second Bible reading: "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, his love is everlasting!" Think on the reversible proposition that where your money is, there will your heart be also; & where your heart is, there will your money be. Then as you read the first reading, pray for the hungry of the earth, & a juster distribution of the world's resources, as you see, in vs.26, that for Joel, the central earthly symbol of shalom, of things as they should be & will be, is a full belly--after which God says "I will pour out my Spirit on everyone."

6 A sixth observation: In Jesus, God knows the names of the poor but hasn't even been introduced to the rich. In our parable, God is looking at society **from below** & sees someone he knows, a poor man, Lazarus. Then, far up above Lazarus on the social ladder, he sees a rich man whom he doesn't know & who, accordingly, has no name in the parable. (Tradition calls him "Dives," but that's just Latin for "rich man.") The reversal-of-fortune principle is built not just into the structure of the story but even into its very wording. So how can we not, like Lazarus in my paraphrase, think of Jesus' first beatitude (as it is in L.), "Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"? So if you want to make sure your name is written in heaven, maybe you'd better back all the way down to the bottom of the social ladder, obeying the evangelical counsel to give up all you have, & stand at ground level with the hungry & homeless, the jobless & hopeless. I'm not saying that this evangelical counsel, this advice from Jesus, is general counsel, for everybody. But those who've received the vocation, the call, to it have wonderfully blessed the needy & the world. (Here, on the screen of my memory, appear many I have known, including graduates of my Midlife Exploration program at N.Y. Theological Seminary.) As for the rest of us Christians, the very radicality of the advice stands in critical relation to all our decisions about money, our goods, our gifts, our lives. The very existence of the absolute demand on some serves as a caution to the rest of us as we are tempted to pull our privileges over our heads & go back to sleep.

7 Here now is the seventh & final observation: God has made us radically **free**, free to move into the light or into darkness, free to choose life or death; so you can't will 'em all. Father Abraham considered Dives' five brothers hopeless cases. He rejected Dives' plea that Lazarus be sent to warn them: Dives had figured that the double shock of seeing the beggar alive again & well dressed would

move them to repentance & amendment of their insensitive, luxurious lives. But Abraham said, "Each one of them has a free Bible from the American Bible Society. If they read the Bible, they'll have both their love button & their fear button pushed & they'll repent." (Notice here that Father Abraham gets in a plug for Bible-reading.) The ex-rich man counters that his brothers' Bibles are dusty & will stay that way unless somebody comes to them.

Which is my opening for getting in a plug for Invite-a-Friend Sunday next Sunday. Some friend of yours with a dusty Bible just might come to church with you next Sunday if you ask: 86% of people who start church-going do so because somebody has invited them personally, face-to-face. If you try, you'll at least get an education in the excuses some folks use for *not* going to church. Four Sundays ago I asked a man to come with us to church. He bowed his head thoughtfully & said, "No, I don't think so." That was progress: two years ago I asked him the same question & he looked me straight in the eye & said "I don't do church." Progress, right? "No" is an advance, an improvement, on "I don't do church." I like to think I'm wearing him down. At least I know the Spirit's at work.

Then I asked a woman & she said yes & will be coming with us next Sunday. When another member of our church heard what I had done, she said "I was going to ask her! My nose is out of joint because you beat me to it!" Well, folks, let that be a lesson to you. Better ask this very afternoon or some fellow-member will get there first. My advice is, Hurry, Hurry, the supply is limited!....Less & less is the encouraging of church attendance something we can pay the preacher to take care of.

There are many ways of **witness**--from the death-defying stand of the martyrs through personal testimony that you have come to know Jesus Christ as your Savior & Lord to the simplest way, which is just inviting somebody to come to church with you. These ways have in common that they all cost the greatest treasure we human beings have to give, namely, the time it takes to care, the time it would have taken for the rich man to do more than merely glance at Lazarus.

"Time is money," the saying goes. Both can be spent, spent toward hearing the best words we can ever hear as trustees of God's riches: "Well done, faithful servant, enter into the joy of thy Lord." "Purge our pride & our vainglory; / Fill our hearts with prayer & praise; / May we offer for thy service / All our wealth & all our days. // Thou hast giv'n thy Son to save us; / We would give our lives to thee, / Naught withholding, freely yielding / That all men thy love may see. / Now in grateful dedication / Our allegiance we would own, / Off'ring talents, time, & treasure / For the mercy thou has shown" (UCC195).

In closing, I remind you of the words we sang in the first hymn (UCC177) this morning: "To give & give & give again / What God hath given thee; / To spend thyself nor count the cost; / To serve right gloriously / The God who gave all worlds that are / And all that are to be." Amen.

---NOTES: (1) The "Witness" statement concluding our Craigville IX Theological Colloquy, on "Who do YOU say I am?," includes some words pertinent to this sermon-Thanksheet: "Jesus shocks our conventional sensibilities, thereby opening new worlds to us....We claim the promise that the first will be last, the rich will be empty, the poor will be full, and the lowly will be exalted."

(2) Did Jesus preach an amoral reversal of fortune (Dives & Lazarus exchanging "luck" no matter how each had lived)? Highly improbable, given his +/- ethical sanctions in appealing to the individual. But his preaching does use the prophetic-apocalyptic rhetoric of radical reversal, a rhetoric Luke may heighten (as in the Magnificat [1.46-55; or does Mt. soften, as from L.'s "poor" [[6.20]] to Mt.'s "spiritually poor" [[5.3]])? But often what's amoral vis-a-vis the individual is moral in collective perspective (eg, an AIDS baby; again, chaos-theory's bigger picture).

(3) Can we draw, from the Bible's poetic language, a lineal-sequential order of afterlife events? No. The general judgment-resurrection theme requires some intermediate state: that's one picture. Another: upon death, each of us faces immediately the ultimate consequences of our behavior before death (as in the Lazarus/Dives story, & L.23.43).