

“The True Meaning of Wealth”

Luke 16:19-31
September 30, 2001
James R. Gorman

From Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (Constance Garnett Translation):

Once upon a time there was a peasant woman and a very wicked woman she was. And she died and did not leave a single good deed behind. The devils caught her and plunged her into a lake of fire. So her guardian angel stood and wondered what good deed of hers he could remember to tell God. "She once pulled up an onion in her garden," said he, "and gave it to a beggar woman."

And God answered: "You take that onion then, hold it out to her in the lake. and let her take hold of it and be pulled out. And if you can pull her out of the lake, let her come to Paradise, but if the onion breaks, then the woman must stay where she is."

The angel ran to the woman and held out the onion to her. "Come," said he, "catch hold and I'll pull you out." And he began cautiously pulling her out. He had just about pulled her out, when the other sinners in the lake, seeing how she was being drawn out, caught hold of her so as to be pulled out with her. But she was a very wicked woman and she began kicking them off. "I'm to be pulled out, not you. It's my onion, not yours." As soon as she said that, the onion broke. And she fell back into the lake and is burning there to this day. So her guardian angel wept and went away. [Told by Grushenka as a way of explaining her own miserly way of life. "At least I gave him an onion," she said.]

We've often talked of death as the final reckoning, the final balancing of the books. All the wonderful jokes about the pearly gates are about that, aren't they? The story is told of three doctors who died on the same day and appeared before St. Peter at the pearly gates. The first doctor was asked what he did during his life. He said that he had spent all his career in medicine in the deserts of Northern Africa working only for his room and board at a free clinic. St. Peter was greatly impressed and admitted him immediately to paradise.

The second doctor said that he had been a plastic surgeon to the stars and had amassed a great fortune and had given very little of his fortune away—or had given only enough to get a tax break each year. St. Peter said that his fortune meant nothing here and he was sent immediately to the eternal fires of hell.

The third doctor said that he had worked as a chief executive officer for a managed care organization— a health maintenance organization. St. Peter without hesitation said, “Here are your keys to paradise.” Whereupon the second doctor cried out, “Wait a minute, you are sending me to hell and him to paradise? I don't get it.”

And St. Peter responded, “Well, he will go to heaven. But only for three days when his benefits will run out and then he will be discharged back to the eternal fires.”

This story told by Jesus in Luke’s Gospel is one of those uncomfortable Pearly Gates stories, only there’s nothing funny about it is there? During his life the rich man received all his good things and he shouldn’t really expect much from life everlasting. He asks father Abraham to intercede for him to no avail. The rich man, who has no name in this story, calls to father Abraham from across this wide chasm, “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.” A wealthy man still giving orders to the help.

No luck. There is a unmerciful finality about this story. The rich man without a name discovered too late the true proportionality of wealth.

I’m not sure that we moderns are particularly persuaded by threats of eternal damnation or promises of eternal reward. We’re like residents of Arizona of whom a 18th century bishop of California is supposed to have said, “those who live through an Arizona winter have no need of heaven and those who live through an Arizona summer have no fear of hell.”

But Jesus’ story about the nameless rich man and poor sore-infested Lazarus is not so much about threats of eternal damnation but rather a lesson on how to live in such a way that wealth and poverty has a kind of right proportionality. It’s not so much about balancing the books on Judgment day, but rather a way for us to find a balanced frame of reference so that we can measure the real proportions of wealth. “The rich man is dressed in fine linen and eats something like a banquet at every meal. There is nothing for him of ‘do not be anxious what you shall eat or what you shall drink.’ He has none of those worries. He has no anxiety, because his life is good, crowned with mercy and loving-kindness.”¹

And then there is a poor man who is graced by a name, Lazarus. He is covered with sores; probably he has no health insurance. He eats the droppings from the table; he is so weak and defenseless that the dogs lick his sores. Jesus draws the distinctions between rich and poor with no middle ground. There is no spillover from the one to the other, no trickle down wealth. There is a great chasm between them both in life and in death.

But this story is not necessarily about eternal punishment but about how one ought to live one’s life now. It is an attempt to get some sense of proportion about wealth and life. It is a story that makes the point in sharp and contrasting terms that the love of money is the root of all evil.

Stephen J. Gould is a professor of Zoology at Harvard University. A few days after the attack on the World Trade Center, he and others went to New York City to offer their assistance in any way they could. He writes:

¹Walter Breuggemann, *The Threat of Life*” p. 137.

"As we left a local restaurant to make a delivery to ground zero late one evening, the cook gave us a shopping bag and said: "Here's a dozen apple brown bettys, our best dessert, still warm. Please give them to the rescue workers." How lovely, I thought, but how meaningless, except as an act of solidarity, connecting the cook to the cleanup. Still, we promised that we would make the distribution, and we put the bag of 12 apple brown bettys atop several thousand face masks and shoe pads.

Twelve apple brown bettys into the breach. Twelve apple brown bettys for thousands of workers. And then I learned something important that I should never have forgotten - and the joke turned on me. Those 12 apple brown bettys went like literal hot cakes. These trivial symbols - in my initial judgment - turned into little drops of gold within a rainstorm of similar offerings for the stomach and soul, from children's postcards to cheers by the roadside. We gave the last one to a firefighter, an older man in a young crowd, sitting alone in utter exhaustion as he inserted one of our shoe pads. And he said, with a twinkle and a smile restored to his face: "Thank you. This is the most lovely thing I've seen in four days and still warm!"²

There are many such stories to come out of this great tragedy. And they give us a decent and direct sense of the right proportions of wealth in a wealth-obsessed world with its painfully abrupt distinctions between the rich and the poor. This is especially so when viewed from a global perspective. The gaps between rich and poor nations and the rich in the rich nations and the poor in the poor nations is as wide as the ditch between the rich man and Lazarus. These stories are about all that is truly valuable in a world that has valued all the wrong things. They are signs of life and light in these past death-obsessed weeks.

Robert Lewis Stevenson, best known for his adventure story *Treasure Island*, was in poor health during much of his childhood and youth. One night when he was quite sick, his nurse found him with his nose pressed against the frosty pane of his bedroom window. "Child, come away from there. You'll catch your death of cold" she said. But young Robert wouldn't budge. He sat, mesmerized as he watched an old lamplighter slowly work his way through the black night, lighting each street lamp along his route. "See, look there" Robert pointed, "There's a man poking holes in the darkness."³

We cling to these stories from ground zero of the simple graces that humans are capable of in difficult times because they poke holes in our darkness and bring us face to face to eternal truths about ourselves. Obvious truths. Truths we learned in Kindergarten and then spent a life unlearning. That true wealth is not material but spiritual. And that's all Jesus ever wanted us to know.

²"A Time of Gifts," September 26, 2001. Stephen Jay Gould, a professor of zoology at Harvard, is the author of "Questioning the Millennium."

³Cited in Peter James Flammig, *Poking Holes in the Darkness* a collection of sermons (1992). p. 1.