“The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus
Luke 16:19-31

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“Understanding is a matter not only of intelligence but of character and readiness, and therefore the Scripture releases itself to us over a lifetime, as we are able.”

Fred B. Craddock
It is commonly understood that Jesus’ ministry reflects a compassion for the poor and the marginalized. All the Gospels treat the poor and oppressed with preference but Luke, more than any other Gospel writer, colors his Gospel with political, social and economic influences. Most people in Luke’s time were born into their social and economic positions for life with little chance for improvement. Since the majority of people were in the lower strata of the economy, poverty, oppression and hopelessness were their constant companions. Responsive to the needs of his listeners in their circumstances, Luke’s presentation of wealth/poverty takes many forms, some of which are social commentary, proclamation of God’s reign, eschatological promise, Scriptural interpretation, and standards of discipleship. The message of hope for the masses becomes a promise of eternity where values are reversed. The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus is the ultimate expression of the “reversal of fortune” theme: hope and warning. There is hope for the poor that God’s Kingdom awaits them; there is warning for the rich that heaven is closed to them unless they show mercy to the poor.

In examining Luke’s position on wealth/poverty, it is important to examine the economic climate of the time in the Greco-Roman world. Who are the poor, who are the wealthy, and how do they relate to each other? Furthermore, since the Gospel was written for a Christian audience, how does economics factor into the Christian community? In his Prologue, Luke acknowledges that there have been considerable writings about Jesus already. Instead of repeating theology, Luke has taken the information and rewritten it from a new point of view. Reshaping written and oral sources, Luke adds details and verses that nuance or heighten the impact of Jesus’ message to the poor. Although there are many themes to be found in the Lucan Gospel,
one theme that has been labeled a “theology of the poor”\(^1\) is woven throughout the course of the Gospel. More so than any other Gospel, Luke brings up the subject of possessions and it is in the uniquely Lucan verses that the strongest position is demonstrated. Examination of the Gospel involves socio-scientific criticism, but also much of the detail expressed is acquired by redaction criticism.

Luke did not create his Gospel out of his imagination but wrote from sources and oral traditions available to him. Most biblical scholars agree that Luke’s Gospel follows the outline of Mark’s, and relies on Q (Quelle) and older traditions, but they do acknowledge, “…it is extremely difficult to decide how much material the evangelist freely composed himself and how much he took over from already shaped traditions or sources.”\(^2\) A general consensus is that Luke adapted his material in many ways to reflect his own theological views. Marshall is more certain:

> In the first place, it is evident that Luke has subjected all his sources to a stylistic revision…The extent of the revision varies…he revised narrative material more heavily than sayings material, in particular he appears to have revised Mark more thoroughly than his other sources for the Gospel.\(^3\)

Whatever his sources, Luke selected, arranged and shaped the material in response to needs within his Christian community, influenced by the tensions and circumstances of his day. Perhaps it is obvious but it is necessary to point out that Jesus’ words were directed to Jews in Israel; the political, economic, social and cultural influences of the Gospel Evangelists and their audiences had shifted from the time of Jesus. After the death of Jesus, the social and economic situation hardly changed. But in time as Jews from the Diaspora joined the church, and later the Gentiles, the mix created

tensions within. From a movement within Judaism the early Church had moved to a messianic group outside Judaism and also outside Gentile pagan religions of the day. There is considerable debate about the audience of Luke’s gospel—Jewish, Gentile, or mixed. Probably it is a mixed assembly and possibly, as Brown suggests, Luke is addressing the churches of Paul’s evangelization. The authors also disagree on the composition but most probably there were representatives of both the leading group of the upper stratum and the lowest group of lower stratum. Economically tensions may have resulted from the disparity between the majority of followers who were poor and newcomers who were more prosperous. Social tensions flared up about table fellowship, continuing as a source of tension between Jews and Gentiles but also the disparity between wealth and poverty reflected tensions between an assembly made up of both upper and lower classes.

It is impossible to know definitively the purpose of Luke’s strong emphasis on justification of the poor. Stegemann and Stegemann suggest social tensions within Luke’s church. Luke’s Gospel, like that of the other Evangelists, reacted to the tensions and circumstances of his day and nuanced the story of Jesus. Stegemann and Stegemann elaborate:

… from a socio-historical perspective we must consider the fact that our sources, the Gospels, already reflect a development in the followers of Jesus in which not only their social composition and shape have considerably changed but also their relationship to Judaism, in which they began, is different. For the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles are shaped by an increasing deviance experience…, which especially the Gospels have obviously, projected back into their presentation of the genuine followers of Jesus.4

Marshall suggests that Luke was addressing the tensions to instruct the Church of his day, namely, how it ought to act in its spiritual life and in its relationship to the world. Written within the economically and socially oppressive Roman Empire, it is not unreasonable to speculate Luke’s passionate compassion at the injustices suffered by the masses of the Empire. A Gospel addressed to Christians might be a safe vehicle for addressing social injustices without drawing the attention and antagonism of Roman officials.

The Greco-Roman world in the first century was a blossoming empire with much development in construction, transportation and warfare. In the agrarian economy of the Roman Empire social inequality prevailed with political power concentrated in the ruling class (2 to 5 percent) which had a great accumulation of property and wealth, obtained in part from various conquests. Most land holdings were large estates owned by the wealthy who farmed them with slaves or day laborers. Although most of the population worked in agriculture, only a few farmers owned small parcels of land and most who worked in agriculture existed on a low subsistence level with no produce to spare beyond feeding their family. There were some wealthy freed slaves, trades people or merchants but the majority of the population belonged to the non-elite or poor. Stegemann and Stegemann say it best:

The vast majority of the rural populace lived on the fine line between hunger and assurance of subsistence. There were in most parts of the empire, masses of very poor without land or means, living on the edge of or even under minimal existence.\(^5\)

Taxes were overwhelmingly burdensome and compulsory service a requirement so that wealth accumulation was restricted. Famines were frequent, grain shipments were lost, and no programs were in place to ameliorate starvation. Those who were fortunate to be

slaves had more assurance of food and shelter, as did also those who had trade associations with the wealthy. There was of course variation within the non-elite class from those who had a reasonably steady income to those, like the widows, orphans, and ill, who survived by begging and were never sure of their next meal. Generally, however, the Greco-Roman economy of the first century ensured a resigned population whose daily struggle for bread consumed most of their energy. It was a difficult life for the masses, made even more difficult by the contempt and abuse heaped on the poor by the wealthy and powerful.

Emerging from among the poor and empathizing with them, Jesus preached salvation to all peoples offering entry into the Kingdom of God through faith and repentance. Luke’s two written sources for his Gospel—Mark and Q—portray a Jesus whose teachings and healings were inclusive of poor and rich, Jew, Roman, and Samaritan, but especially tender to the poor and disenfranchised. Luke has drawn on that portrayal of Jesus but has elaborated on the theme with unique material probably drawn from oral traditions and, possibly, personal interviews. It is interesting to note that Luke’s Jesus is more aware of economic disparity and is much more outspoken about the evils of wealth than the other Gospels. In particular, Luke brings in the “reversal of fortune” theme vehemently applying it implicitly and explicitly throughout his Gospel. To illustrate Luke’s theology it is best to look at those passages that are unique to him as he skillfully weaves the theme of poverty/wealth/hope/reversal of fortune.

The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus best illustrates the discrepancy between the rich and the poor in stark and startling contrasts. The reversal of fortune theme builds slowly but surely into a powerful indictment of the rich with strong warnings of their dire
fate if change is not affected in their lives. The parable begins with a strong contrast between Lazarus and the rich man in appearance, food preferences and lifestyle. Luke’s audience would immediately recognize the rich man, well-fed, pompous and ostentatious with his wealth. This is not just a well-to-do man but also a very rich man. Purple dyes were expensive so purple garments were worn only by the very rich. Fine linens too were dear and not available to the poorer classes. Luke’s succinct description is brief but telling. When he writes that the man “dined sumptuously each day,” each word is suggestive of much interpretation. The rich man did not eat to satisfy hunger, but “dined” which implies a feasting with a variety of exquisite foods. That he did so sumptuously magnifies the event even more than the usual feast and evokes thoughts of unheard-of delicacies in enormous quantities in the company of many other wealthy companions. That he did so each day suggests a convivial lifestyle with no anxieties beyond those of making more money and finding ways to spend it. This would be a man, possibly a lawmaker or other official, immune to physical labor and living from the proceeds of taxes amassed from the masses of the poor. Perhaps he is a rich landowner, eating off the fat of his real estate profits, eating literally off the fat of the bodies of the poor. Whatever his position, Luke leaves this up to the audience to fill in with their experience of wealth. The poor of the Roman Empire know well enough it is the rich and powerful who are their oppressors. Luke’s purpose is simply to establish a disconnect between the rich and the poor, to emphasize the insurmountable chasm that exists between the two stations in society.

The contrasting description of the poor man, Lazarus, is also telling. Instead of living in a house surrounded by luxury, Lazarus is “lying” outside the door. Not only is
Lazarus not clothed in fine garments, he is also not clothed at all and his nakedness is exacerbated by weeping sores. Even the poorest of Luke’s audience would have groaned at the pitiful description of Lazarus. This surely must be the fate of so many who have fallen sick and destitute when they could no longer work; this description of Lazarus surely must touch their most dreaded fears for themselves. Again Luke’s contrast of Lazarus’ food requirements is stark and to the point: unlike the rich man’s appetite, Lazarus seeks only the fallen scraps, the minimal requirement for bodily survival. Almost lost but subtly indicative are the fallen scraps of food. What happens to them? Are they thrown out or fed to the dogs? What a stark contrast to the story of Jesus feeding the 5000 and collecting the scraps in baskets. Luke clinches this scene with the dogs licking Lazarus’ weeping sores with a harsh indictment of the rich man. Dogs’ tongues have healing properties and they give Lazarus what little relief he receives. The rich man, who values dogs over human lives, gives no relief to Lazarus. Who is more compassionate – the dogs or the rich man?

The contrast between Lazarus and the rich man goes beyond clothing and lifestyle. Implicit in the descriptions are the attitudes below the surface. In the Greco-Roman world, the rich and powerful accepted their status without question. Honors, prestige, influence and everything that money could buy were taken for granted. They regarded themselves as deserving of their elite positions and despised the poverty of the masses. Their contempt for the poor translated into separation from actual discourse with those in the poorer classes and indifference to their life struggles. There must have been many beggars in the cities and villages of the Roman Empire but for the very rich these
were no more than annoyances that were to be ignored. A blind eye and a deaf ear were the norm.

It is not too difficult to imagine that Luke’s audience would have understood the portraits of Lazarus and the rich man with all their nuances and implications. They saw the two as opposite sides of society but very real and evident in their everyday world. What happened to these two upon their deaths was also consistent with reality. The rich man was buried because he could afford a burial place. No doubt it was done with pomp and ceremony—a well-lived life having ended graciously. Lazarus had no burial and no doubt his body was dumped in a mass public grave, unceremoniously discarded—very much like his life had been. However—and this is where Luke brings the parable to a resounding climax—the afterlife holds very different prospects for the two. In heaven, in God’s kingdom, society’s values hold no weight; instead there is a reversal of fortune.

Upon death, Lazarus was carried up by an entourage of angels who triumphantly placed him in the bosom of no one less than Abraham himself, Father of all nations. Here is an echo of another uniquely Lucan parable, the Parable of the Prodigal Son, where the father crushes his returning son to his bosom embracing and kissing him in delight. The rich man, sent off to his reward with ceremony, had no angelic escorts and there was no fanfare with Abraham. In fact, he found himself in the “netherworld” in torment. The netherworld is the place for the dead outside of heaven where the rich man was consumed bodily by flames and mentally by the distant sight of Abraham and Lazarus and those who shared eternal paradise. What a fearsome indictment for the insular rich: eternal flames and eternal regret; eternal torment for a few decades of decadence. What was Luke thinking with this scathing attack on the rich?
Luke’s purpose becomes clear in the remaining verses of the parable. Luke sets out a program for the rich: there needs to be an awareness of the plight of the poor, a refocusing of attitude towards the poor and a resolution for consistent sharing of wealth and almsgiving to alleviate the suffering of the poor. He sets out this program with the plea of the rich man to Abraham, “Father Abraham, have pity on me.” That would have hit home with the wealthy. How often had they not heard a similar cry outside their doors? “Have pity on me!” cried Lazarus and he was not heard; would the same cry from a deceased rich man resonate with the listeners? And how low have the expectations of the rich man sunk from a “sumptuous” lifestyle to literally a drop of water for the tongue. The irony between the rich man’s tongue and that of the dogs would not be lost on his audience. What Lazarus suffered in torment of hunger, thirst and painful sores, the rich man suffers for eternity. It must seem a heavy price to pay for ignoring the suffering of the poor.

If that argument does not inspire fear in the wealthy, Luke backs it up with references to the Hebrew Scriptures. Among many wealthy Jews there was the notion that wealth was a sign of God’s favor on them and poverty, especially crushing poverty, a sign of God’s punishment and disfavor. Jesus had pointed out in another parable that this was actually a misreading of the Scriptures, using proof statements out of context as well as ignoring contradictory statements to validate their positions. To rebut this way of thinking, Luke has Abraham refute the self-satisfaction the rich man might be feeling about his possession by simply stating that wealth and poverty are not a choice. The rich man fortunate to have “received what was good” has a special duty to praise and thank God. Because riches were received from God and not earned, it is up to the wealthy to
share with those who have “received what was bad.” Then Luke presents in heaven the ultimate reversal, the society of the Greco-Roman world turned inside out: “Moreover, between us and you a great chasm is established to prevent anyone from crossing who might wish to go from outside to you or from your side to ours.” The deep, insurmountable chasm between the rich and the poor in the world will be replaced by the same insurmountable chasm but in reversed roles.

The rich man is not a bad man. He is concerned for the future of his five brothers and begs for mercy, not for himself but for them. Those pleas fall on ears that will not act on his behalf. Does Luke’s audience remember similar pleas they have heard for mercy from beggars and their families? Did those pleas fall on ears that would not act? The rich in Luke’s community would have been squirming by this time, but there was more to come. Luke delivers a warning: “They have Moses and the prophets. Let them listen to them.” Clearly Hebrew Scriptures have spoken about the poor and the obligation of the well-off to care for them. Admonitions for sharing with those who have nothing are found throughout the Scriptures. The rich man’s response must have jarred his listeners. “Oh, no,” he says. And Luke again drives home the point for the wealthy not to pick and choose from Scripture but take in the whole. The idea of the reversal of social destinies comes from the oldest Jesus tradition.6 The coming kingdom of God will reestablish a balance between previous social destinies.

The final argument in the parable is a challenge to the Christian community’s faith. “If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone should rise from the dead.” With this double-edged argument, Luke hits the nail on the head. Suddenly there is a connection: the name of the poor man Lazarus with

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the man brought back to life by Jesus. Wasn’t that enough to remind them of the power of Jesus? And did they not see in Jesus’ victory over death the ultimate reversal of fate? A poor man, criticized during his lifetime and condemned by the elite to the most shameful death, was raised and exalted to the right hand of God. If the wealthy were not feeling humiliated and the poor not feeling exhilarated after this parable, Luke had missed the mark.

Luke’s Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus is only part of a theme interwoven throughout the Gospel interpreting God’s plan for the poor. Luke introduces God’s preference for the poor early with Mary’s reply to the angel—“Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord.” (1:38)—framed in humble obedience. Mary’s Magnificat (1:46-55) introduces the theme of reversal which says that God’s reign is a reversal of society’s values: the lowly will be blessed and lifted up, the arrogant dispersed and deposed; the hungry will be fed and the rich sent away hungry. “What God has done for Mary anticipates and models what God will do for the poor, the powerless, and the oppressed of the world, the central theme of the second movement of the song, the triumph of God’s purposes for all.” The birth of Jesus in a “stable” and the humble offering of Mary and Joseph at the presentation further emphasize the theme of poverty. It is at the presentation, too, that Luke begins to thread the theme of hope that God offers the poor in the characters of Simeon and Anna (2:29-32) who acknowledge Jesus as the “salvation” God has promised to Israel.

God’s salvation is more explicitly framed within Luke’s Sermon on the Plain (6:20-26). Like Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:1-7), Luke’s Jesus blesses the

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7The Catholic Study Bible (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990)
poor, the hungry, the weeping and the despised, but Luke’s version has a different twist. Luke moves Jesus from the mountain onto the plain, a theological leveling, so the very people with whom he identifies surround Jesus. Another twist: the four blessings are contrasted with four woes, leaving no ambiguity. Luke makes clear who is on the wrong end of the woes: the rich, the well-fed, the contented and the arrogant. In case this is not understood, Luke has Jesus say it explicitly. In a redaction of an argument among the disciples (Matt 18:1-5; Mk 9:33-37; Lk 9:46-48), Luke adds these words: “For the one who is least among all of you is the one who is the greatest.”

The rich do not come off looking well in the Gospel of Luke. Luke throws harsh indictments on them and challenges them repeatedly to be aware of the poverty around them, to take action on behalf of the poor and to share their wealth in response to the cries for mercy from them. At the same time, Luke’s Gospel affirms the value of the poor. However society may judge, condemn and deplore the poor and disadvantaged, God’s kingdom waits to restore the balance in their favor. The rich, however, are not left without hope for eternal life. Jesus tells them, “Sell your belongings and give alms,” (12:33) and a little later he says, “Rather when you hold a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind; blessed indeed will you be because of their inability to repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous” (14:13).

Are the poor the inheritors of eternal life and the rich excluded? Marshall warns against taking the contrast of wealth/poverty to extremes: “Luke does not present poverty as an ideal in itself, nor wealth as intrinsically evil.”  He suggests that what is being criticized is the rich and their attitude towards the poor. From other sources, the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus has been faulted for its economic prejudices,

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namely the rich go to hell; the poor go to heaven. Craddock suggests, “Luke is attacking a theology that says a good man prospers but the wicked are not so” (Psalm 1:3-4).”\textsuperscript{10} It may be true that reversal of fortune attacks the commonly held notion of wealth signifying God’s favor, crushing it completely in favor of God’s interpretation of an eschatological reckoning. Luke was addressing concerns within his community and this notion might have been part of the tension. However, there were more obvious tensions stemming from the mix of the assembly.

The audience Luke is addressing is not of the same composition as the crowds that followed Jesus. In the primarily rural area of Jesus’ ministry, the poor were part of a more homogenous social landscape ethnically, religiously and socially. In the time of Luke’s writing some fifty to sixty years after Jesus’ death, the audience is a mixture of Jews and Gentiles, a mixture of religious origins, and a mixed social milieu worshipping side-by-side. The tension would have been palpable: difficult for the rich and humbling for the poor. The automatic recoiling of the rich and the automatic deference of the poor would have led to dismal interaction in Christian communities. In Jesus’ time the poor were a class differentiation; in Luke’s time they are a social dilemma. Seeing the tension within the emerging Christian churches, Luke needed to break through the attitudes: to seek compassion for the poor from the rich and to neutralize the anger and suspicion of the poor for the rich. Hope went out to the poor: although you were born into poverty a great kingdom awaits you. Challenge went out to the wealthy: eternal rewards depend on you seeing opportunities and acting on them to alleviate the poverty of others. Ultimately, the rich hold the keys to their destiny. It is not the wealth, but the obsession about wealth to the exclusion of God and neighbor that closes the door to the Kingdom.

\textsuperscript{10} Craddock, \textit{Interpretation}, 196.
In the context of Luke’s teaching about wealth and poverty, I would like to present a modern perspective. Luke’s position was to challenge the wealthy to greater awareness and responsibility for the poor. I think the Catholic Church has done an admirable job in trying to alleviate poverty in so many countries. In our own parish, as in probably many parishes, there are the food drives, the clothing drives, the Christmas giving tree, the rotating shelter and the monthly stipend to a Mexican nursing station. My parish is a wealthy parish in Saratoga known for its generosity and financial support in times of need.

As I think about Luke’s challenge, however, I realize that all that my parish does is on the basis of a “hands-off” policy. While it gives generously, the money or gifts that change hands are delivered by a small group of volunteers. There is minimal contact with anybody poor. Because in every parish there are those who live out the gospel message, there are a few individuals who are truly committed to encountering the poor with dignity and respect. One of our parishioners was the Director for Loaves and Fishes and during her tenure, there was much more involvement with the soup kitchen on a personal level. I went a few times with my children. I have to admit that it was an unsettling and uncomfortable situation for me. Growing up in an immigrant family, I did not grow up with wealth but desperate, smelly and unkempt poverty is totally alien to me. My immediate impulse is to fix the situation—provide bathing facilities, ensure medication requirements, find a voice for the poor. It troubles me that we do not have a better understanding of poverty—its causes and our share of responsibility.

The difficulty lies, I think, in separating poverty from criminal activity. I work with people who are “poor” by society’s standards. One lady lived in a shed for many
months without water or toilet facilities. My impulse was to invite her to come live with me but it was unrealistic. With her three sons in jail, an ex-husband who relinquished any responsibility for his family, a young unwed daughter with three small children and herself in a relationship with a man half her age, all I felt comfortable doing was being a friend. So I too have a reluctance to create community with the poor.

Nevertheless, Luke challenges me to become more aware and to bring an awareness of poverty to my home parish. Perhaps discomfort eases with information and association. I know that the poor share the same hopes and dreams and fears that are part of the human condition, but there are definitely societal prejudices in place.

To bring a more reasonable example into play, I have noticed the subtle but delineating behaviors of my parish. When our church office was replaced, I was on the fund acknowledgement committee. When we had chosen the design for acknowledging donors, I requested that all names appear randomly irrespective of the amount donated. Despite much appeal to fairness and community spirit, the group that had contributed handsomely and wished to be acknowledged for it outvoted me handily. More recently, stained glass windows have been installed in the church. The cost of these windows will be borne by a process of a silent auction. The highest bidders will have a plaque mounted beneath attesting to their donation. It does not take much intelligence to know whose names will appear on the plaques. Unfortunately there was no discussion about this but it saddens me to know that wealth still has the upper hand.

Not unlike the Church of Luke’s time, today’s church assemblies exhibit tension between the “have” and “have not”s. Globally the Church has taken on many relief services and is well known for its many international social programs. Nationally and
internationally, social justice is being recognized as an important focus for concern.
Locally the Diocese has fostered the Stewardship program in parishes, recognizing that wealth is not only financial but also extends to time and talent. Despite tensions, it is comforting to know that the Church continues to address the tensions that come up and nuance its response to the changes in political, economic and social structures.
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