

THE POLITICS OF COMPASSION

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Luke 16:19-31

The elderly clergyman had recently retired. Most of his sermons had dealt with the blessings of charity and he had constantly urged the wealthy members of his congregation to share their worldly goods with the less fortunate. At a reception in honor of his retirement, someone commented upon this and asked him, "Do you think you've had any success?" With a trace of a smile the old minister replied, "Oh, yes indeed. As a matter of fact I think I reached the halfway point to my goal. I urged the rich to give to the poor – and the poor, for their part, have agreed to accept. Now all that's left is to convince the rich."

As I thought about this sermon I also thought about an alternative title--something like, "The problem of relying on charity to achieve social justice." We have heard a lot lately about charity as a means to address social problems and meet social needs. Now that we have a new White House Office of Faith-based and Community Initiatives, we can expect the federal government to begin setting up criteria for making grants to faith-based and non-profit community organizations to address pressing social needs. My purpose this morning is not to disparage the efforts of charitable organizations, especially not those that are faith-based. There is lots of room for charity and kindness in our world. And the more impersonal and bureaucratized our world becomes, the more that certain kinds of charity may be needed. But there is reason to be skeptical about a reliance upon charity as a social program, reason that goes far beyond any concerns regarding separation of church and state.

[A recent poll shows that most Americans believe faith-based and non-profit organizations do far more than the federal government to solve social problems in their communities ["Bloomington Herald-Times," Feb. 2, 2001]. With respect to certain problems that is probably true. People who work in faith-based organizations and non-profits typically are not in it for the money. They typically are more personally involved and genuinely concerned about those whom they serve than are those who are just "doing a job." Nonetheless, there are lots of worries about how government might intrude upon religion in this new alliance that is about to be created between government and non-profits. As one journal editor noted, "He who pays the piper calls the tune" [James Wall, THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY, Feb. 21, 2001, p. 37]. There are also worries that religious groups may use their government-funded programs to proselytize, or to restrict services to those who accede to their religious demands. These are legitimate worries. But these are not what worries me most.]

What worries me most is that a growing reliance upon the efforts of private, voluntary, non-profit organizations to address social problems and meet social needs will do little to alter the great disparities of power and wealth in American society. It will shift some of the burden of caring for our most needy citizens away from government and away from the citizenry as a whole. It will place more of that burden upon the shoulders of that minority portion of our citizenry who work for, belong to, and are significant contributors to the faith-based and non-profit organizations that will be called upon to ameliorate society's ills. What is being proposed appears to be a government-orchestrated mass charity and social service program. It has little to do with social justice. Social justice would require a more fundamental, more equitable, more permanent redistribution of the political, social, and economic resources of our society.

This could all be described, explained, argued, in socio-political terms – but this morning, in this setting, I want to take a different approach. I want to reflect upon a story, a story attributed to

Jesus, the story we know as "The Rich Man and Lazarus."

"Like so many of his parables," writes one commentator, "Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus speaks with a clarity that needs little comment" [Robert E. Luccock, *WORD & WITNESS*, 10-9-77]. "Of all the parables," writes another, "its meaning seems to me to be the most opaque" [Colin Morris, *THE HAMMER OF THE LORD*, 39]. My own view lies somewhere in between. Clearly, the parable depicts the reversal of fortunes of the rich and the poor man. The rich man, who received good things during his lifetime, finds himself in torment. The poor man, who received evil things in his lifetime, goes from misery to the comfort of Abraham's bosom. But it is not altogether clear what lesson we are to draw from this.

Jesus must have been greatly troubled by the enormous gulf that separates the privileged rich and the desperate poor of our world. No honest reading of the New Testament Gospels can ignore the depth of his compassion for the poor, the outcast, and those on the margins of his society, nor his pointed observations about those who were rich and held social and political power. Yet we would hardly expect Jesus, with his great regard for individual human beings, to condemn the rich simply because they are rich, or to extol the poor simply because they are poor. Surely the rich man in the parable must have been guilty of some terrible sin to be deserving of his horrible fate. Surely Lazarus, loathsome as he appears, must have possessed some special virtue that fit him for Abraham's bosom, the place of highest blessing and bliss. But a close inspection of the parable fails to yield any evidence for the moral superiority of the poor man over the rich.

The material contrast between the two could hardly be drawn more starkly. The rich man is clothed in purple and fine linen, a sign of wealth and royalty, and he feasts sumptuously every day. In brief, he lives like a king! Outside his gate the poor man lies covered with sores, in abject poverty and hunger. His home is the street. His rags fail to cover his ulcerated body. The dogs that run loose pester him and lick his sores.

We do not know how the rich man got his riches, or how the poor man came to such helplessness and misery. Apparently, how they got that way is not relevant to the story. Nor is there any evidence that the rich man has contributed in any way to the poor man's plight. If anything, the rich man allows him to lie daily at his gate, not driving him away. What is clear, however, is that there is no intercourse between these two. They exist daily in close proximity to each other, one within, the other without, but they have no community. The rich man never goes out to Lazarus, and never invites him in.

Two things are unique about this parable. One of the characters, Lazarus, is given a proper name. The name, Lazarus, means "he whom God helps". Colin Morris has observed, "If Lazarus is an example of those whom God helps, then God help those he doesn't!" [op. cit., 39]. Nonetheless, Lazarus has a name. This is true of no other character in any of Jesus' parables. The second unique feature of the parable is its scene of the afterlife, the picture of Lazarus and the rich man after death. This is hardly a literal description of the topography of heaven or the climate of hell. But it is surely a judgment on the situation that the parable portrays. The tables are completely turned. The rich man, who never went to Lazarus in life and did not invite him in, now begs that Lazarus might come to him. But an irrevocable gulf now exists between them. A gulf that could have been bridged in life is now permanently fixed. The parable implies a verdict on the respective circumstances of Lazarus and the rich man that cannot be overturned. The question we must ask ourselves is, Why?

If Jesus had told this parable to rich men, we might assume that it was an attack upon the rich. We might still wonder why the rich receive such harsh condemnation, but we would have a clear fix on who is meant to heed this parable. According to Luke, however, he told this parable to the Pharisees. The Pharisees were not necessarily rich. They were middle management folks. They

were upholders of society, responsible, thoughtful, moderately privileged. They were part and parcel of the religious and political and social establishment, but not the people at the top. They would have belonged to the Rotary Club, or the Chamber of Commerce, or the local Bar Association, or the PTO. The less conventional among them might even have gone to the UU Church. So why does Jesus tell them this parable? And how would they have heard these words?

What do we know about people who are responsible members of society? What do we know about ourselves? One thing is that we tend to regard people on the basis of merit. We want to be rewarded for our own merit, and not judged simply as part of a group. We want people to be held accountable. We do not want people to be recipients of special favors simply because of who they are, nor do we want people to suffer special disfavor simply because of who they are. We would never think it just to punish a rich man simply for being rich, nor would we think it just to favor for a poor man simply because he is poor.

Another thing we know about responsible people is that we tend to regard the prevailing social order as acceptable if not altogether good. There are problems here and there but, on the whole, we have managed to build a society that encompasses our values and goals. Of course there is always room for improvement, but basically we are comfortable with the way things are. We are inclined to assume that the only thing that is clearly wrong about the situation between the rich man and Lazarus is that the rich man never bothered to come to Lazarus' aid.

Yet a third thing we know about responsible people is that we learn to see things in grays, rather than absolutes of right and wrong. Anyone who has had much experience or given much thought to human problems and situations knows that there are usually several sides to any question. Nobody is ever entirely in the right, and seldom is anybody entirely in the wrong. If you go around making absolute judgments about other people and situations, you are bound to be unfair and will often make matters much worse.

So what are we to make of this parable, with its unambiguous, unequivocal, no-shades-of-gray verdict upon Lazarus and the rich man? What evidence is there that Lazarus deserves the bliss that comes to him? What case can be made that the rich man deserves his horrible fate?

If there is any justice in this world, then the meaning of this parable cannot be reduced to a morality tale about two individuals, one rich and one poor. Their biographies hardly sustain such a conclusion. The parable renders no simple condemnation of the individual behavior of the anonymous rich man. Nor is it a blessing upon the poverty of the poor. This parable calls into serious question--indeed, I think it condemns--the prevailing social order. It is a challenge to the Pharisees, and to us--a challenge that says, there is no way you can justify a situation like the one the parable portrays. There is no way you can justify a social order in which two people can lie in such close proximity and be subject to such differing fortunes. There is no way you can justify a society of such glaring disparity in physical circumstance, where one can feast while another starves. This is a parable addressed to those who uphold the social order when that order pushes people to the margins and keeps them outside the gates and allows them to suffer the vagaries of the streets without coming to their aid.

The point is this: When viewed in context, this parable can hardly be understood simply as a diatribe against the rich. That is too easy. That lets all the rest of us off the hook. Rather, this parable speaks to decent, upright, responsible, citizens of the day who lend their moral authority and political support to a social order that is marked by gross inequalities and terrible human indignities. This parable condemns a social order in which the physical circumstances of life are "as good as it gets" for some while for others it could hardly be worse. As Luke must have understood, the parable is addressed to the "five brothers" of the rich man, who--it is

supposed--would change their behavior and correct their lives if only they knew what was required of them. We, the hearers of this parable, stand in the place of those five brothers, and the message is addressed to us. We have been warned. We have been given "Moses and the prophets", not to mention Jesus, not to mention the wisdom of other major religious teachers of the world, and we must heed them if we would know how to live.

It is not that the rich man was rich. Abraham was rich. Yet he was not regarded as a sinner. Nor was the rich man mean, or cruel, or unscrupulous, or dishonest – at least not so far as we know. The problem is that he was comfortable. He was comfortable, when there was a hungry, miserable beggar at his gate. Now you might say, "See, it was really this rich man's personal moral failing that brought condemnation upon him. His heart was hardened. He never came to Lazarus' aid. That, and that only, is why such judgment is rendered against him." This appears to be true. But it does not explain why this parable is addressed to the Pharisees. The Pharisees did not dwell in splendid isolation, with beggars lying outside their gates. The point must be that they, like the rich man, are accountable in a world in which there are beggars and hungry people in the street. The responsibility for such a world falls upon them. It is incumbent upon them to come to the aid of all those who, like Lazarus, lie suffering outside the confines of their established social order.

My sermon title this morning brings into close proximity two words that may not seem to belong together: politics and compassion. All of us, I hope, are believers in compassion. Compassion means "suffering with" others, feeling and caring for them. It is a virtue of virtually every major religious tradition. It is one of the highest expressions of love. For many it defines the character of God. In terms of our parable from Luke, compassion was clearly lacking in the life of the rich man. If the parable is to be believed, the lack of compassion is as grievous as any we might imagine.

Where, then, does the politics come in? [One common view of politics sees it as a rather cold and calculating activity, an amoral if not immoral arena for asserting power in pursuit of individual and collective interests and goals, at best a dispassionate exercise in trying to please most of the people most of the time, at worst an adversarial process of trying to gain the upper hand in order to stay in power. But politics understood in more general terms has to do with the art of governing, and with the means by which people order their life together. As such, politics is, or should be regarded as, a highly moral undertaking.] If we think of politics in terms of the means by which we order our life together, then it makes sense to speak of the politics of compassion.

This parable of the rich man and Lazarus calls upon us to practice a politics of compassion. A politics of compassion may begin with individual acts of compassion. It may require of us the capacity to reach out to those in our midst who suffer, who hunger, who tend to be ignored, who barely subsist on the fringes and the margins of our social world. But a politics of compassion requires more than charitableness toward those who happen to be at our gates. A politics of compassion is deeply concerned, as well, about the social ordering of our world. A politics of compassion asks not only, what can I do to help this person who has been pushed aside and left to languish, but what must be done to alter the conditions in our world that push so many people aside. A politics of compassion acts to remove the legal and social and economic barriers that stand in some peoples' way. A politics of compassion acts to provide the resources and the circumstances that will enable those who lack money and power to participate more fully as equals in the human community.

A good case can be made that our cherished way of life – our democracy – stands threatened by enormous and unchecked concentrations of wealth and power. It is not that the rich are

necessarily evil. Indeed, many of them are very nice people. Think of investor Warren Buffet. Last I heard, he was the fourth richest person in the United States. He is enormously popular with many people, not least those who have followed his financial advice. But I understand that he still lives in a modest house in his Omaha neighborhood, and drives a run-of-the-mill car. His story is remarkable precisely because it is so exceptional. For most people, wealth isolates and insulates. It is not easy to be rich and maintain the common touch. It is not easy to live as the rich and still be tugged and pulled by compassion for those on the margins of society. It is even more difficult to be rich and to be willing to give it up for the sake of a more equal and more equitable distribution of wealth and power.

Almost 800 years B.C.E., a man by the name of Amos delivered a stern warning to the people of Israel. It was, indeed, more than a word of warning, it was a searing judgment. Amos was a sort of self-employed agricultural laborer and merchant. He traversed the countryside, and marketed his fruit and wool in the trading centers of the nation. He apparently foresaw the impending defeat and dissolution of the kingdom of Northern Israel. More importantly, he saw the glaring inequities, the social and political injustice, the corruption of the legal system, the conspicuous consumption, that accompanied the growing disparities of wealth in Israel, and Judah as well. "Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, . . . who drink wine from bowls and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph" [6:4, 6]. As Amos saw it, the ruling elites were particularly to blame. They held the reins of political and economic power. But they did not care for the welfare of the nation, the people as a whole. As a consequence, the whole nation would suffer, beginning with these derelict leaders. "They shall be the first to go into exile" [6:7]. Alas for those who live like kings, and do not care about those who lie outside the gates.

There is a profound conviction within Western democracy that a truly healthy society, free and open to all, cannot long exist with great disparities of wealth and power. Much of Western religious tradition goes even further, to recognize that great disparities in our worldly estate are fundamentally unjust. Our vision must be for an order in which people of differing circumstance do not, will not, perhaps cannot, isolate and insulate themselves from one another. Let it be an order in which the circumstances that make for social and economic isolation and marginalization are to be addressed, eliminated if possible, overcome if necessary. Let it be an order in which proximity does not exist without community. Let it be an order that is marked by compassion. Let it be an order in which the politics of compassion begins but does not end with charity – "For charity is not a substitute for justice" [Morris Adler, CONTEMPORARY RELIGION AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY, B'nai B'rith Department of Adult Jewish Education, 1964, 6]. Let it be so!