



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title: **"No Rich Allowed"?**
Comment: Insert Comment here
Author: The Rev. Tyler A. Strand

Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Amos 6:1-7
Second Reading 1 Timothy 6:11-19
Gospel Luke 16:19-31

Contemporary guide books to Shanghai make a point of noting the supposed existence of a sign during the pre-revolutionary period at the entrance to a beautiful little riverside park on the Bund. The sign was supposed to say, "No Dogs or Chinese Allowed." In fact, this sign never existed. What *was* posted on the gate was a long list of regulations governing who could and could not use the park and specifically mentioning local Chinese of the lower classes who, it was assumed, would loiter, sleep, cook and mess up this venue which was the favorite of the rich foreigners for their promenades. It wasn't a matter of race, at least in *this* case, but a matter of class based on income. At least one commentator on today's Gospel reading suggested that today's parable implies a similar sign being posted at the gates of heaven: "No *Rich* Allowed."

The parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus is one of those really deceptive passages that are notorious for giving preachers the opportunity to "opt out" of saying the simple truth about what it means. Preachers, like most other people in so-called "helping" professions, want more than anything else to be loved. Telling the Gospel truth about this parable will not make a preacher loved by the majority of his or her listeners unless in fact they are themselves poor. He or she just may be blessed by God with enough courage to make a go of it. So here goes.

It's a very simple story, really. The rich man, who ignores the poor man, dies. He goes to hell. The poor man who begs at the rich man's gate also dies. He goes to "Abraham's Bosom" which I will call heaven for lack of a better term. That's about it. But based on other things that Jesus says through the Gospel record, there are some uncomfortable implications to be reached.

Preaching this text in the First World involves imagination. I have most often had to deal with this text in a comfortable suburban or rural town context in which "the poor" represented something very foreign. People knew that the poor existed but most had no idea how they really live or what they really need. Help, in the form of special collections for food or disaster relief was dutifully supplied when asked for, but the idea of "the poor" needed to be hammered home somewhat artificially. One First World commentary I used for this text ended with this noble question, "Do we know how to recognize ... present-day replicas of Lazarus?" The presumed response was, 'no.'

It is quite another thing to preach this text in Manila. Here the challenge is to bring a congregation to the realization of how lucky they are- not because they are rich, but because they are living in a world in which the dichotomy between rich and poor is every bit as dramatic as in Jesus' day and so we can hear this parable loud and clear. Jesus speaks to us directly. We don't need allegory and explanation about Lazarus and the Rich Man when there are bare-footed children knocking on our car doors at the traffic light or running naked through the squatters barrios that one really has to work at *not* to see even in the center of this so-called "modern city."

The simplicity of this story is something that I wish I could avoid- but I can't. The story doesn't say that the rich man was "bad" or necessarily cruel. That would make the moral much cleaner and black and white. Neither does it say that Lazarus was a good and holy man. All we know is that he is poor. When confronted by the Rich Man about his fate, Abraham says only that the Rich Man was favored in life, but not in death. Similarly, Lazarus is getting now what he was denied before. Simple. And very disturbing.

It is disturbing because the story fits in well with other places in which Jesus addresses the awful danger of being financially well-off. "Alas for the rich! It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for you to enter the kingdom of God." Note, please, that Jesus doesn't say, "Alas for the rich people *who are bad*." It doesn't help, either, to try to "fine tune" Jesus' words to make it only the rich who

idolize their wealth to the detriment of their souls who are in danger. That would be like saying that adultery is a sin only for those who get caught, but that keeping a mistress is a discrete right for rich Christians, Protestant or Catholic, who can afford it.

Our Lord Jesus Christ connects being rich- being monetarily comfortable and secure- with living on the edge of spiritual disaster. This isn't meant as a campaign speech for some kind of Christian socialism, but rather as a warning to those who not only *have*, but also collect, maintain, invest and want more. The burden of the proof of the salvation of the rich rests on *them*, implies Jesus, because "you cannot serve both God and mammon." Fr Joe Mock mentioned last week that we didn't need a definition of *mammon*, but I still wanted to look it up. The dictionary says, "Riches, avarice and worldly gain personified as a false god." But you will be hard-pressed to find riches described in the bible in any other way, at least in the New Testament, and even more particularly by Jesus himself. It's not that Jesus hated rich people, and he is known to have eaten with tax collectors and such, who certainly were comfortably placed. But perhaps Jesus' most telling response is found in Matthew's Gospel (19:22) in which a rich young man wants to know the secret of eternal life, but can't make a commitment to God if it involves divesting himself of what he owns- all of it. The bible tells us the young man "went away grieving," and I believe that seeing him go, Jesus grieved too. He knew how hard it was to surrender to God one's need for security, comfort and possession. And the truth of the matter is that most rich people know deep inside that there is a moral quandary presented by having so much more than one absolutely needs in a world where others suffer from want and hunger.

And this is where the preacher reaches the point of no return, particularly preaching to a group in which most, but certainly not all, would be classed as comfortable, if not downright wealthy. He can switch gears and start to give examples of wealthy people who are also good, loving and faithful Christians, and he can commiserate about the impossibility of doing anything realistic or meaningful about poverty in the Philippines. He otherwise risks undermining the sympathy of those who have money and who choose to share it in various either generous (or else carefully measured) amounts and ways...including giving to the church and therefore providing his own salary. The burden of proof remains with those who *have* in their relationship to those *who have not*. Ask Lazarus or the Rich Man. Ask Abraham. Or, better yet: ask Jesus. If you think about what the preacher risks if he is *not faithful* to what

Scripture says and *knowingly dissembles* the warning in what Jesus tells us in the Gospel, then you will understand why I'm giving Jesus the last word: "Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven."