

“God of the Poor and Hungry”

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

7-22-18

Based upon Deut. 15:1-11: Luke 16:19-31

Last month, the Reverend Jimmie Hawkins, director of the Office of Public Witness of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), was arrested, along with a number of other demonstrators, for praying for the poor outside of the U.S. Supreme Court, as part of the “Poor People’s Campaign,” a 40-day campaign of non-violent demonstrations in 40 state capitals inspired by the campaign Martin Luther King Jr. started for the poor decades ago.¹ When Hawkins was arrested, he spoke out about the problem of poverty in our nation, adding that “As a Christian, I am called to speak for and stand with those whose voice is stifled and silenced. We are called to be the proclaimers of ‘good news to the poor.’”² A few weeks later, the government started proclaiming its own different version of good news. “‘The War on Poverty’ has been a success,” representatives from the White House Council of Economic Advisors proclaimed. “Poverty is no longer a real issue for us in the U.S. anymore, since only about 3 percent of the population is truly poor now.”³ Why would Hawkins and others risk jail time to pray about a problem that doesn’t exist anymore? The answer is more complicated than “we don’t agree with the 3% figure,” although that’s true too. The answer is grounded in the fundamentally different understanding of both economics and humanity that we have as Christians, an understanding which comes in part from texts like those we just heard today.

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus is one of the least well known of the parables in *Luke*, and yet, in my opinion, speaks more readily to our time than some of the ones which are better known. It was inspired, in part, by two folk tales, one out of Egypt involving a dramatic reversal of certain characters’ fortunes, and the other out of Judaism, involving Abraham’s servant Eliezer. The name Eliezer is “Lazarus” in the Greek. According to some Jewish Midrash, after Abraham died, he sent Eliezer in disguise to wander the earth to see whether or not people were keeping faithful to God’s covenant.⁴ Although today’s parable never says that Lazarus was really Eliezer in disguise, it is clear that he plays the role of teaching both the rich man and us about covenant faithfulness. (It’s also clear that the Lazarus in the story had nothing to do with Jesus’ best friend Lazarus who we read about in the *Gospel of John*.)

¹ Jones, Rick, “*Rev. Jimmie Hawkins, other faith leaders arrested in Poor People’s Campaign demonstration*,” Presbyterian News Service, June 12, 2018, retrieved from <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/rev-jimmie-hawkins-other-faith-leaders-arrested-in-poor-peoples-campaign-demonstration/>; Jones, Rick, “*Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival kicks off on Mother’s Day*,” Presbyterian News Service, May 11, 2018, retrieved from

<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/poor-peoples-campaign-a-national-call-for-moral-revival-kicks-off-on-mothers-day/>

² *Ibid*, Jones, Rick, “*Rev. Jimmie Hawkins, other faith leaders arrested....*”

³ Stein, Jeff and Jan, Tracy, “*The Trump administration has a new argument for dismantling the social safety net: It worked*,” THE WASHINGTON POST, July 14, 2018, Business Sec., retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/white-house-declares-war-on-poverty-largely-over-amid-push-to-revamp-social-programs/2018/07/13/8f9536ea-86b2-11e8-8f6c-46cb43e3f306_story.html?utm_term=.4b545c3fd87c; see also Tankersley, Jim and Sanger-Katz, Margot, “*Declaring War on Poverty ‘Largely Over,’ White House Urges Work Requirements for Aid*,” THE NEW YORK TIMES, July 12, 2018, retrieved from

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/12/us/politics/white-house-war-on-poverty-work-requirements.html>

⁴ “*The Rich Man and Lazarus: Reflections on Luke 16:19-31*”, Patheos.com, posted Sept. 29, 2013, (and citing McKenzie, Alyce M., *The Parables for Today* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2007)); retrieved July 17, 2018 from <http://www.patheos.com/progressive-christian-rich-man-lazarus>

The parable paints for us a story in three scenes. In the first, we are shown two radically unequal characters. One is very rich, lives in a grand house in a gated community, dresses in the fabrics and colors of royalty, and feasts each day like a king. He is not named, so tradition called him “Dives,” which means “rich man” in Latin. The other man is Lazarus, a man so poor and miserable that even the dogs take pity on him. He has no good clothing of his own and spends his days yearning for Dives’ scraps because he was so hungry.

In the second scene, both men are dead, and their fortunes are reversed. Lazarus is now with the great Father Abraham himself, and Dives is now in torment in Hades. Although it’s clear that he is suffering, it is not yet clear why he’s there. Since Abraham was also rich in his lifetime, it seems unlikely that being wealthy alone was Dives’ crime.

In that last scene, Dives sees Lazarus and Abraham across a great chasm. But he still doesn’t speak directly to Lazarus as a fellow human being. Instead he asks Abraham to make Lazarus his servant and get him a drink. When Abraham refuses, Dives say, “O.K. fine, but if you won’t help me, at least help my five brothers.” “No,” Abraham says. “They have Moses and the prophets to tell them how to behave. If your brothers won’t listen to them there’s nothing to be done.”

Given that we live comfortably in the richest country in the world, people like us tend to assume that we are like the rich man in the story, which makes this a very uncomfortable parable to hear. But the ending actually gives us the alternative option of casting ourselves as one of the brothers. It’s not too late for us; we can listen to and obey Moses and the prophets. If we do, then we discover that Dives’ crime was not that he was rich; it was that he did not use his wealth to help those in need.

There are dozens of texts in the Bible commanding that we take care of the poor and the hungry. In the Old Testament, many of those texts are the same ones I cited when talking about God’s command to help sojourners, widows, and orphans. But perhaps the most powerful and thought-provoking of all of the texts is the lesson we heard today from *Deuteronomy*, which vividly illustrates the unique economy God built into the Mosaic Covenant. The law describes something called the *Shemitah*, the last of a seven-year cycle designed to address economic transactions in Israel. On the seventh year, those in the covenant community of Israel were required to cancel or forgive all debts owed to them, with the exception of debts owed to them by foreigners.⁵ Additionally, they were supposed to free any indentured servants whether their debts were paid off or not, and they were supposed to give generously to those who were poor, including those whose debts they had just forgiven, so that they could afford to start fresh. The reason the Israelites had to do all of this was to ensure that their nation would operate according to God’s economy, not the economy of other nations. In God’s economy, all are meant to be able to dwell in abundance and benefit from it. So this rule was to ensure that over time, radical economic inequality born out of a free market economy and human sinfulness would not replace the economic equity of God’s kingdom.

⁵ The foreigners in this text are *nekari*, i.e. people passing through the kingdom, not the *gerim*, or sojourners taking up residence there.

In order to persuade the Israelites to obey this law, God promised that if they obeyed, there soon would be no one in need in the kingdom because God would make sure that there was enough for everyone. All the people had to do was to make the seven-year reset a part of the rhythm of their economy, and their entire nation would live comfortably. God then also admonished them: “Do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. Be careful you do not entertain a mean thought against your needy neighbor and give nothing, or he may cry out to the Lord and then you will be found guilty.”

Imagine what would happen if every seven years banks forgave mortgage holders their debt, or if schools forgave student loans! Imagine if every seven years those who were on the bottom of the economic ladder were not only freed from the debts that were crushing them but were also given seed money to enable them to climb up a rung or two, and if everyone who had profited off of the labor of the working class for seven years had to reset their expectations over what was a reasonable profit. Can't imagine it? Yea, well, neither could Israel. This is such a radical text that almost as soon as this law was written down, the commentaries started trying to qualify it away. “You only have to forgive debts if the debtor brings you to court,” some argued, knowing full well that debtors could not afford to bring their cases to court. “You only have to forgive the debt if it's a close family member,” others argued.⁶ Oh, the golden handcuffs of wealth! It is hard to let go of both what you believe you are owed, and what you believe you can get.

We are never told in the parable of Dives and Lazarus why Dives did not help Lazarus in his obvious need. But the second scene in the text, when he refuses still to address Lazarus directly suggests that one reason is that he simply did not see Lazarus as a fellow human being in need. Sure, he passed by him several times a day since Lazarus was camped right outside his gate. But for Dives, Lazarus might as well have been a fire hydrant. He was either too busy, or too preoccupied with his own needs to see him.

The invisibility problem is still a very real problem today, as evidenced by the fact that people in leadership in our country feel confident saying that we don't have really poor people in the U.S. any more. Of course we do. Notwithstanding the recent report, most organizations who deal with poverty assess the poverty rate in the U.S. at somewhere between 12 and 14%, which amounts to about 41 million people.⁷ Those numbers may be even higher, if we were to measure the people living on the edge as well as those who have already fallen off it. According to a Federal Reserve report that came out in May, 4 in 10 adults in the U.S., if faced with an unexpected expense of \$400 would not have the means to cover the bill without selling property or borrowing money. Seventy percent of Americans turn to a federal program for help at some point. 5.3 million live on less than \$4 a day, including government assistance, and more than 25

⁶ “*What is the Shemitah?*” Got Questions website, retrieved from <https://www.gotquestions.org/The-Shemitah.html>

⁷ See *U.S. Poverty Statistics*, Federal Safety Net (US Census Bureau, Sept. 2017), retrieved July 17, 2018 from <http://federalsafetynet.com/us-poverty-statistics.html>; *Poverty Facts- Compassion International*, retrieved July 17, 2018 from <https://www.compassion.com/poverty/poverty.htm>; *2018 World Hunger and Poverty Facts and Statistics*, Hunger Notes, retrieved July 17, 2018 from <https://www.worldhunger.org/world-hunger-and-poverty-facts-and-statistics/>

million do not have health insurance.⁸ So all it takes is one big, unexpected hospital bill, or a layoff that lasts too long, to kick people from a place of safety, to living in their cars or worse. But in communities like ours, these people are rarely seen lying on the sidewalk with dogs licking their wounds. They look like us; so we don't realize how many are hanging on by a thread, wondering where their next meal is coming from or where they are going to sleep that night.

But there is a second reason that people in our day and age do not help those in need as readily as they could, an even more troubling one in my opinion. In our nation, poverty is more often seen as a moral failing than a result of unfortunate circumstances. This is particularly true, I'm sorry to say, among Christians. In a poll conducted by THE WASHINGTON POST and the Kaiser Family Foundation last year, 46% of all Christians said that "lack of effort" is generally to blame for a person's poverty, compared with 29% of all non-Christians.⁹ In some branches of Christianity, the percentages were even higher. Whether this view is a negative side effect of the deeply ingrained Protestant work ethic that has long been a big part of our faith, or reflects more the infiltration of partisan politics and racism into people's faith, or some combination of all three is anyone's guess. But the end result is that Christians, more than non-Christians, tend to ask whether a person deserves helping before they offer help. They are less likely to help if the person's bad choices caused his or her need. They are also more likely than atheists to blame laziness or bad choices on the person's troubles, than to blame the social, economic, and justice systems of our country, which exacerbate poverty by nurturing gross economic inequality rather than equity.

Right now, the difference between the famous 1% and the rest of the country is really shocking. The 1% owns more wealth than the bottom 90% *combined*. But the difference between the 90% and the 0.01% at the top is even worse. To illustrate it from the standpoint of annual salary, in 2015, the bottom 90% had an average salary of \$34,074. The top 10% had an average salary of \$312,537, and the top 0.01%, an annual salary of \$6,747,439!¹⁰ Most of the systems of our nation favor the top not the bottom. That means that it is increasingly hard for people at the bottom, even if they work very hard, to climb out of the hole of poverty, (which is the number one cause of hunger.) The statistics are even worse when the comparison is made globally. There are still 702 million people who live on \$1.90 or less a day in the world despite the fact that there is enough food and water to feed everyone.¹¹ There is enough wealth for all to thrive too, but it is not equitably distributed. The difference between available income and necessary expenses, between access and opportunity for individuals and nations is so great, that there is no way the poor will ever be able to help themselves adequately. There truly is an impassable chasm.

⁸ *Ibid*, Jeff Stein and Tracy Jan, "The Trump Administration has a new argument..."

⁹ Zauzmer, Julie, "Christians are more than twice as likely to blame a person's poverty on lack of effort", THE WASHINGTON POST, Aug. 3, 2017, retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/08/03/christians-are-more-than-twice-as-likely-to-blame-a-persons-poverty-on-lack-of-effort/?utm_term=.d5732e7e4d6e

¹⁰ "Income Inequality", inequality.org, retrieved July 17, 2018 from <http://www.inequality.org/facts/income-inequality> (citing Emmanuel Saez, UC Berkeley).

¹¹ *Ibid*, *Poverty Facts*.

Blaming the poor for the chasm is not the solution, however, nor is it faithful. In neither of today's texts are the poor judged for their worthiness. In fact, one of the striking features of the parable is that no reasons are given for the inequity between the two main characters, thereby making it impossible for us to judge them for their circumstances, or dismiss them as different from our own. We don't know if Dives inherited his money and Lazarus didn't, or if Dives worked hard and Lazarus didn't. We don't know if Dives or Lazarus were alcoholics or profligate spenders. Jesus doesn't say because to Jesus it didn't matter. What mattered was that we recognize that Dives' sin was that he had the means to help and chose not to do so.¹²

As I said before, thankfully, we don't have to be Dives, even if we are economically blessed. We can be the brothers who learn the right lesson by God's grace. The secret lies in recognizing, as the *Deuteronomy* text does, that what matters to God is not how deserving we are of economic blessings, but the fact that the poor are our kin. The NRSV uses the word neighbor and community member in its translation of the *Shemitah*, but in the Hebrew, the word most often used is "brother." This is because in God's eyes, we are all family. "Don't let your brother suffer," God preaches. "Don't be hard-hearted and tight-fisted. Would you hold a debt over your own brother's head if he was in trouble? Of course not. Well guess what? When you live according to God's covenant, everyone is your brother or sister." This is what makes the story of Lazarus and Dives so painfully ironic. It could be, and maybe should be called "The Story of the Seven Brothers" because in the end, what finally moves Dives from self-centeredness to compassion is the thought of what will happen to his five brothers who had not yet been condemned. "Do something for my brothers!" he pleads. Yet if he had only shown the same compassion for his other "brother," Lazarus, they all would have been in a better place.

The current statistics on poverty and hunger in our world illustrate that we cannot build a healthy, equitable economy on the principles of "Every man for himself" or "He who dies with the most toys wins." Thank goodness, therefore, that God has shown us a better way. As disciples of Christ, let us continue to advocate for that way, and for our brothers and sisters as Jimmie Hawkins and others are doing. Let us continue to help those we can. When we recognize everyone as a brother or sister, and strive to build a world where all are seen and helped when they're in need, then the good news is that there will be enough abundance for us all. God has guaranteed it. Thanks be to God! Amen.

¹² It doesn't take much for the wealthy to shrink the chasm is they so choose. If the Wall Street *bonus* pool from 2016 (not their salaries) was given instead to the 3.2 million people who as fast food workers, home care aids, and restaurant workers and bartenders, there would be enough money for them all to all but double their hourly wage. *Ibid, Income Inequality.*