

Last week we read the first part of chapter 16 from Luke about the parable that Jesus told about the dishonest manager. That was a very difficult parable to understand because Jesus seems to lift up the dishonest manager as the hero in the story. I shared one possible interpretation that the parable could be about how we are called to be good stewards of the resources that we are given. To not waste our money and resources when they can be used in a way that is pleasing to God.

This week we will be reading another parable that Jesus shares. This one is found at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke. I will warn you. It is another parable about money and wealth. And this parable seems to suggest that the way we handle our wealth and money has eternal consequences.

We are reminded that parables are stories told by Jesus that used everyday images to convey important messages. Stories which had multiple levels of meaning. The gospel of Luke records lots of parables told by Jesus.

In this parable that we are about to read, we will be introduced to a rich man and a poor man named Lazarus. This is the only parable that Jesus tells in which someone is named in the parable. Lazarus here is not to be confused with the Lazarus that was raised from the dead in the gospel according to John. That seems to be a different person.

Lazarus is a derivative of the name Eliazar, a name in the Bible which means “God helps.” “God helps.” Some people have given the name Dives to the rich man in this story. The name “Dives” comes from the Latin translation of the word “wealthy.” But nowhere in the story is the rich man actually named. The only one named is Lazarus.

**Read Luke 16: 19-31**

Any baseball enthusiast will know that this week included the last inning pitched by Mariano Rivera. Rivera will go down as one of the best Major League pitchers of all time and certainly the best relief pitcher of all time. When Rivera was called up to the majors at the age of 25, he did not show the stuff that would make him unhittable. After his first outing, a New York sportswriter described his debut as “another shabby outing by a young pitcher.”

Soon Rivera was able to pitch a fastball 95 miles per hour. But that is not what made him a great pitcher. Rivera’s pitch that made him unhittable was his cut fastball or cutter as it is called. Rivera found his cutter shortly after becoming a Christian. This, he says, is no coincidence. In the spring of 1997, Rivera was a conventional fastball pitcher, hurling heat straight at the plate and mixing that up with breaking and off-speed pitches.

But during pitching practice one day, he suddenly found that he could not make his fastball stay on course. He had been having a tough spring, he says, thinking too much and feeling pressure to always be perfect. And here was this ball, out of nowhere, seemingly with a life of its own, and Rivera completely unable to control it.

The bullpen catcher thought he was messing around, and the mystified pitching coach worked with Rivera for weeks, trying to help him get the ball to settle down. But he couldn’t. Or it wouldn’t. And so finally, according to *Sports Illustrated*, Rivera said, “I’m tired of working at this, let’s let it happen.” Rivera said he learned that day to stop trying to be in control but to trust God and let God be in control.

Rivera’s story seems to like the story of many successful and wealthy and famous people who say that they became wealthy because of God. People who claim that they have all of these riches because God blessed them with these riches. And so there are many people who are rich and famous and who are Christian who live very well and thank God for their tremendous wealth.

But the reason that I share Rivera's story this morning is because of how he continues to live his life. You won't find Rivera bowing in prayer on the field or making a big show of his Pentecostal faith. You will find him behind the scenes thanking the hot dog vendors and the group sales guy for working hard, as the reporter who wrote the story I read said he saw him do.

Baseball is now over for Rivera. The Yankees will not make the playoffs. Go Braves. Where you will find Rivera now is working with his wife on restoring an abandoned church in a depressed and helping his pastor wife as they build a congregation together. Not a congregation of wealthy young adults or baby boomers. Not a big box church with all of the bells and whistles that you find in the trendy big box churches that keep sprouting up.

No, the church that the Rivera's are starting is made up of white folks and black folks and Hispanic folks that have been meeting in his home. The church will be called the Refugio de Esperanza, or Refuge of Hope.

What he has in mind is a brotherhood (and sisterhood) of Christ, a spiritual and material outreach without boundaries, giving help to whoever needs it wherever they are, in the form of school supplies, haircuts, hot meals, Thanksgiving turkeys, toys at Christmas, college scholarships, bed sheets and bath soap for Sandy victims, and on and on. (The Mariano Rivera Foundation already donates between \$500,000 and a million dollars each year.)

He wants to keep funding church start-ups, as he's already done in Mexico, the Dominican Republic, California, and Florida, not to mention New York. He wants to buy the building next to the church and make it into an after-school program for at-risk kids. He and his wife Clara are even talking about starting a seminary. Refuge of Hope, then, is more than a bricks-and-mortar retirement hobby; it's a dream of a network of congregations and charities and pastors.

So we read or hear about Mariano Rivera and we think that he is a great role model. We sit back and we applaud how this very rich man is using his resources to help others in a way that certainly seems to fit our understanding of the Christian gospel.

But I invite us to not let Mariano Rivera become our barrier to allowing this parable to convict us. In this parable that Jesus tells, a rich man dies and goes to a place of torment called Hades while a poor man goes to a place of eternal peace in the bosom of Abraham. In the parable that Jesus tells, the rich man is not condemned for being dishonest. He is not condemned for his beliefs.

He is condemned for the way he treated the poor man Lazarus who was hungry and diseased and lived at the other side of the rich man's gated community while they both lived on earth. He is condemned for treating Lazarus as a servant rather than as an equal. The rich man even tries to treat Lazarus as a servant after their death by asking him to bring him water to cool his tongue during his torment.

The gospel of Luke has a lot to say about riches in his gospel. Luke emphasis how in the kingdom of God there is a reversal of fortune for the rich and poor. When Jesus is born Mary proclaims that the hungry have been filled and the rich sent away empty. Jesus says that God favors the poor and that the kingdom of God belongs to them. Jesus declares that he has come to proclaim good news to the poor. The rich, like Zaccheus are applauded when they give away their money and possessions to the poor.

This sounds like works righteousness though doesn't it? Doesn't this all sound like salvation is earned by the actions we do on earth? In many ways it does. This parable convicts all of us in how we live our life on earth today. The way we treat one another does matter to God. The way we treat those who have less does matter to God. The way we create fair and just systems in our world does matter to God if we take this parable and all of the gospel of Luke seriously.

I think we are ACPC do know that caring for our neighbor and particular our neighbor who has less is important. That came through in the answers you gave in the recent cottage meetings.

When folks were asked to share a time when you have seen the faith community at it's very best you gave answers like: (share answers which are recorded on cottage meeting sheets)

And I think we do get it. But we need to be more intentional in making more of an effort to do what we know we are called to do through ACPC and in our everyday lives. There are some mission opportunities coming up here. Take part in one of them.

Identify needs yourself and address them. Put the word out of what you see and how people can join with you in serving others.

This parable teaches us that the way we treat others that have less is very important to God.

May we live into the type of followers that Jesus calls us into being. AMEN.

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-Given: Sept. 29, 2013 in Allison Creek Pres (York, SC)