

Sermon: Real World Imagination

Year C, Proper 21

[Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15; Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16; 1 Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31](#)

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So what exactly did the rich man do wrong? I mean, I know it's Stewardship Sunday so obviously the answer is, "he didn't fill out his pledge form." But in looking at the text from Luke, what is it he did that causes his story to take such a change of direction?

Did he fail to give money to Lazarus? He obviously had plenty and Lazarus obviously had none. But it doesn't really say. Maybe he did give money to Lazarus. He seems to have given the leftovers from his table. Indeed, we all know that he could have given all his money, sold all his fine purple clothing and all the tasty delicacies that were on his table every day, and given all that away and there still would have been someone lying in the road with open sores whom the dogs licked (Luke 16:21). Who knows? Maybe that's what Lazarus did and that's why he ended up where he ended up.

Was he mean to Lazarus?¹ He probably had servants or body guards or just people who wanted some of his wealth and prestige to rub off on them. Any one of those people could have run Lazarus off. Did the rich man make fun of him and mock him to his face or behind his back? Did he refuse to send the leftovers from his table out to the poor people who might want them? It doesn't say he did any of those things. In reality, it doesn't appear that he really even noticed him. And who can blame him? We see the refugees in Syria and hear about those on Nauru. We hear about Laotian kids still being injured by cluster bombs dropped 45 years ago. We see the families in Louisiana trying to get food stamps to hold them over until their car insurance will pay for them to find a clunker to get them to and from work. We can't possibly take in all that suffering, so we tune it out. Why would the rich man be any different?

Did he wait to act until he had a clear sign? I mean, if Lazarus had turned up at the edge of our driveway, we know what we'd think about. If we give him money, is he just going to spend it on alcohol or drugs? And if we help now, isn't he just going to be back in a little while, maybe wanting to sleep on the Social Hall floor? In a way, the rich man has a clear sign: he's rich. How many times has he been told that God helps those who help themselves. God is showing favor on him by having the rich man's life run smoothly. If Lazarus is in a fix, maybe that's what God intends. Perhaps that's the only way Lazarus will learn what to do with the freedom God gives us. Who is the rich man to interfere?

If we took a survey, everyone could probably come up with some kind of answer, some specific thing that the rich man should have done differently to not have ended up where he ended up, in agony, in flames (Luke 16:24). But if we had to put all those answers under one kind of umbrella reason, we could make a good argument that the rich man failed to be a good steward. I know, you're not surprised to hear that on today of all days. But the text itself is pretty clear, this life has consequences for the next.²

But even if you agree that he failed to be a good steward, what is it that he failed to steward? He thinks that if Abraham will just send Lazarus back to the rich man's five brothers, they will get

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975): 214.

² George W. Knight, "Luke 16:19-31: The Rich Man and Lazarus." *Review & Expositor* 94, no. 2 (1997): 281-282.

themselves on the right track. But Abraham says, “no”. His five brothers have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them (Luke 16:29). Abraham could have said that they have the Ten Commandments or the priests at the Temple or common good manners. But he doesn’t. He says they have Moses and the Prophets.

What the rich man has failed to steward is his own prophetic imagination. We all have one. All us people of faith are called to have one. We think of prophets as being really special individuals. Usually who have wild hair and smell a little funky. God talks to them and they talk to God and it’s not always easy to tell a true prophet from someone with mental illness. But we all have a prophetic imagination.

Oh, come on. We’re realists, not prophets. We live in the real world where if we want the lights on and the heat up in the church, we know we have to pitch in financially. We know that to have the sidewalks shoveled and the Senior Luncheons served, someone has to show up early and get it done. We live in the real world where there’s coercion and manipulation and we have to be on our guard. We know that if we don’t look out for our own self-interest, no one else will. We know that people, on the whole, are pretty untrustworthy, even if they don’t mean to be. We know that resources are scarce and can’t be multiplied. We know that our best bet is to go along to get along and to aim for normal.³

We’re realists. And we’re Christians. We believe that God reached into the course of human history and changed it forever. We believe that God sent his Son, God’s own self, to take human form, to live as we live, to live and love and suffer and weep for friends who died and worry about who would look after his mom when he died. We believe that God’s son died on a cross and three impossibly long days later, he came back to life. We believe that God’s son taught us how to look at this very real world and to see the Kingdom of God.

We’re Christians. We look beyond coercion and manipulation to what actions we need to take to remain faithful to the God of Abraham and Sarah, of Moses and Miriam. God calls us not only to trust our neighbor, but to love them, even as the rest of the world begins training us from a young age about Stranger Danger. We acknowledge that resources are scarce, but we also acknowledge that when groups of people really work together, there is enough for everyone to eat, and drink and have a safe place to sleep. We know that normalcy is a goal, but in the end it comes down to life and death, to loyalty or betrayal of the reign of God.⁴

We all do it. We look into this real world and we see beyond it to the Kingdom of God because that’s what we’re trained to do. That’s why we keep the lights on and heat up in the church and shovel the walkways and wash the dishes. That’s why we fill in our pledge slips. We understand that to do what Jesus taught us to do, asked us to do, we need to remember all the times the real world said there was simply no way forward and we found a path. We remember deliverance and exodus from Pharaoh, because we still face Pharaoh by another name today. We remember the covenant at Sinai, because every generation has to negotiate ways of living together and caring for all of Creation. We remember the blessings and curses from Deuteronomy, because they are the words we need to stand up to the world as it is and point out that it cannot keep the Kingdom from coming. We read and re-read our sacred texts so we can

³ Keith A. Russell, "What about Lazarus?: A Theological Reflection on Poverty in the United States." *Review & Expositor* 111, no. 2 (2014): 156.

⁴ Russell, 156.

deconstruct this world as it is now in order to pledge our allegiance to the world that has been promised to us – the new heaven and the new earth, the new Jerusalem.⁵

Having a prophetic imagination, seeing the Kingdom of God in the unholy mess of the present day, is not enough. We need to see and we need to act.

In today's reading from Jeremiah, we get an incredibly tedious, blow by blow account of a real estate transaction. Jeremiah buys a field in his home town from his cousin. There are duplicates made of the contract and the duplicate is rolled up and sealed closed and stored in a clay jar somewhere safe. That way, if the working copy is illegally altered, there's a reference copy that proves what it said originally.⁶ The silver Jeremiah pays for the field has to be weighed out in front of witnesses. It couldn't be any more real world. An atheist wouldn't have done a single thing differently. Where is the prophetic imagination in that?

Jeremiah has been telling the people of Jerusalem for 31 chapters that they were not in right relationship with God, they weren't doing what it took to bring forth the Kingdom of God in this world. For 31 chapters he has been telling them that just like the Northern Kingdom of Israel fell, Jerusalem would fall to an army that came from the north. For 31 chapters they have been telling him to pipe down, to stop insulting the King, to get out of the Temple. For 31 chapters he's kept talking, insulting and teaching in the Temple. So he's in jail when he purchases the land.

He's in jail. And Jerusalem is surrounded by the Babylonian army. Who came from the north. And there is no way this is not going to end with Jerusalem's destruction and the destruction of the entire kingdom. Everyone who has silver to weigh is going to be sent into exile in Babylon. Basically, Jeremiah just paid full face value, for a piece of land in the middle of war zone. In today's world, he bought land in Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan.

Now *that* is prophetic imagination. Because after warning for 31 chapters that the end was coming, when the end came, Jeremiah didn't sit back with an "I told you so" smirk on his face. He acted to show what he saw. That God had not abandoned the people. That they would someday return and Israel would be a fertile, productive, peaceful place again. That the smart money was on God's side, not on the side of destruction and despair.

So in this year's stewardship campaign, take the opportunity to reflect on where your prophetic imagination can take you. Let your generosity come not only from what you have but for what you believe this rural country church can bring into this brutal world. Let your generosity to the church help the whole community who gathers here bring their prophetic imaginations together. Help this church challenge each other and the rest of the world to not settle for the way it has been and is and will always be. Let your gift put into action your belief that loaves and fishes multiply, that the poor, the hungry and those that weep are blessed. Let your gift go into action so that every rich man and every Lazarus who is touched by this church has an opportunity to see the Kingdom of God breaking through in this world and live into that reality. Let your gift be an act of prophetic imagination.

⁵ Russell, 156.

⁶ Stanley Brice Frost, "The Book of Jeremiah" in *Interpreter's Concise Commentary: The Major Prophets: A Commentary on Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel*, edited by Charles M. Laymon, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1983), 187.