

Sermon, Proper 21C

Luke 16:19-31

Preached Sunday, Sept. 30, 2007 at St. Philip's, Brevard
By RDF

“The poor you will always have with you” (John 12:8).

Jesus spoke these words, and the world has never forgotten it. This memorable phrase has been quoted by people from all walks of life, whether Christian or not. And, once again, Jesus was right. Any study of history or or sociology or economics will demonstrate that the poor have been with us for all of recorded history.

That's true in the abstract. But you don't have to live very long before you encounter the poor in person. You walk the streets of a city, and the poor will be there: sleeping in doorways or begging for a bite to eat. You drive on highways and interstates, and you will see them, looking for a ride or sitting at the exit ramps with signs asking for work, money or food. You travel to other countries, and you will encounter them — hoping that you will share some of your tourist dollars with them. Even in a beautiful place like this, you don't have to go far to see evidence of the fact that Transylvania County was once one of the poorest in North Carolina — and still has a long way to go. Dilapidated trailers and shacks with leaking roofs and no insulation are around us in abundance, if we are willing to open our eyes and see them.

But that's the problem, as Jesus reminds us in the Gospel reading today. Even if we don't think of ourselves as rich, I doubt that anyone here today can honestly think of himself or herself as poor. And those of us who are not one of the poor don't really want to see them — even when we have to pass them by on our way to some other place.

If it sounds like I'm pointing my finger this morning, please know that I'm pointing it first at myself. I have encountered God's poor many times, and I have often felt inadequate and unfaithful in my response.

About two weeks ago, I was leaving St. Philip's, on my way to see a member of the church. As usual, I was hurrying to try to make the appointment on time. As I opened the back door of the parish house, a

man who had been sitting on the ground near my car, stood up quickly and moved towards me. I could see that he was poorly clothed and hadn't shaved for days. He asked me, "Are you the pastor?" I knew what his next question would be. Remembering that I didn't have my clericals on that day — and quickly thanking God that this man didn't know the proper Episcopal terminology — I told him, "No." That didn't provide much deterrence, however, and the man went on to say that he had been stranded in Brevard and was trying to get home. I asked him if he'd been to The Sharing House or other churches. He said yes, but that they couldn't help him. "Well, I'm sorry to hear that," I said (not very sincerely), "good luck trying to get home." Then I got in my car and drove away.

The man's face has been haunting me ever since.

I think the point of the story about Lazarus and the rich man is that we're supposed to be haunted by the poor. Jesus wants us to never forget that the poor will always be with us because our existence is bound up with theirs. That is the case even when we turn away from them, even when we move to a place like Brevard with the secret hope that we can somehow get away from the poor and other social problems.

Of all people, Andrew Carnegie seemed to understand this. Carnegie was the famous 19th Century industrialist, multi-millionaire, and philanthropist. Listen to what he said in an essay called "Wealth":

"The problem of our age is the proper administration of wealth, so that the ties of brotherhood may still bind together the rich and poor in ... relationship."* President John F. Kennedy had a similar idea in mind when he said, "If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich" (Inaugural Address, 1961). And in the story of Lazarus and the rich man, Jesus shows us that the fate of our eternal souls is bound up with our relationship to the poor.

"The poor you will always have with you," he said. And people who are no friend of Jesus — who want to ignore the needs of the poor — have been quoting him ever since. Talk about being quoted out of context! Jesus said this because Judas condemned the woman who used expensive perfume to anoint Jesus. He said it could have been sold and the money

given to the poor. In the next verse, the Bible tells us that Judas said this — quote — “not because he cared about the poor,” but because he used to steal money from the common purse kept by the disciples (12:6). The other piece of background information we aren’t provided is that Jesus was quoting from a verse in the Hebrew scriptures that was very dear to him. In the Book of Deuteronomy, God says, “*Since the poor will always be with you on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land’*” (15:11).

In death, a great chasm is fixed between the rich man and the poor man that cannot be bridged. In life, the only chasm between them was the rich man’s refusal to recognize Lazarus and his needs. God help us if turn away from one of the relationships that has the power to save our souls. We should respond to the needs of the poor because it’s the right thing to do. But in the process, we might also find salvation. In the first centuries of the undivided Christian Church, the poor were considered the Church’s treasure. The early Christians did not forget that Jesus also said, “Blessed are the poor,” and, “as you have done it unto one of the least of these, you have also done it unto me” (Luke 6:20 & Matthew 25:40). The poor are still the Church’s treasure. But Jesus is waiting for us to act as if we believe him.

In my sermons this month and next, I am speaking about our Baptismal Covenant. It’s the foundation for our common life as Christians, and it cuts across all artificial boundaries we create to distance ourselves from each other. Here are two of the promises we make every time we re-commit ourselves to the Baptismal Covenant:

“Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?” And, “Will you ... respect the dignity of every human being?” And our answer to these questions is _____ ? [“I will, with God’s help.”] I hope you can hear in these promises Christ’s preferential option for the poor. The poor are our neighbors, and we are called to serve and love them. And we commit ourselves to respecting their dignity — which is sometimes the only thing they have left in this world.

I’m not very good at this, and sometimes I don’t do it at all. But together, as a body of Christian people, we can turn towards the poor, instead of turning away from them.

Last week, all the bishops of the Episcopal Church met in New Orleans for an important meeting. At our healing service on Wednesday, I told the congregation that I felt very encouraged about what I'd been hearing about the meeting. I said, "The media focused on the controversy, of course. But something you're not going to hear from the secular press is that the bishops brought a love offering of \$900,000 for continued relief and recovery efforts." As I spoke, I saw a head nodding vigorously at the back of the chapel. It was Ann Trufant, a part-time member of St. Philip's. When she's not staying in Connestee, Ann lives in New Orleans. It had been quite a while since I'd seen her, so I asked her to tell us how things were going. She said, "I'm among the lucky people whose houses were left untouched by Katrina. But the rest of New Orleans has a long way to go to re-build."

Katrina killed 1,600 people, destroyed 200,000 homes, and displaced nearly 1 million people. In New Orleans, only 60 percent of homes have electricity compared to before the hurricane and only 67 percent have mail service. Many people are still living with family members or in government-provided trailers. A lot of work remains to be done. The bishops and others in attendance at the meeting spent Saturday working to repair homes in Louisiana and Mississippi devastated by Katrina. Our bishop worked to put floor joists in a home that is being rebuilt.

Bishop Charles Jenkins of Louisiana is the son-in-law of one of our parishioners at St. Philip's. He said the Day of Service is a symbol of the fact that the Episcopal Church "stand[s] for the dignity of humanity. Even in the midst of our disagreements, we stand strongly for all of God's people."** That's one of the many things I love about our church.

We don't have to be a bishop to help the poor. As Maria reminded us last week, we don't even have to have the right motives. We just need someone to remind us not to turn away. You can attend the Adult Forum today and hear about efforts to promote a living wage so that people who work here can afford to live here. You can talk to Mark and Mary Richmond about volunteering at the Bread of Life soup kitchen. You can volunteer at the free medical clinic or The Sharing House or any

number of other places. (Even if you can help for just a few hours per month, I bet they'll find a way to use you.)

You can also respond next month when we ask you to increase your yearly pledge so we can give away more money for outreach.

Jesus was right. The poor we will always have with us. Maybe it's the last part of the verse that's the hardest. They are with us. *They are part of us*. The wealthy man found this out the hard way.

Lord, help us not to turn away.

**The North American Review*, 1889, quoted in Bartlett's Familiar Quotations.

**Episcopal News Service story September 22, 2007: "Day of Service puts bishops to work in Mississippi, New Orleans" (from www.episcopalchurch.org/ens/).