

**TEMPORAL ACTS, ETERNAL CONSEQUENCES; LUKE 16:14-17, 19-31;
SEPTEMBER 25, 2016; THOMAS H. YORTY; WPC**

The parable of Lazarus 2016: fifty-three hundred people fired – front line workers and low level managers (sacrificial lambs for the senior executives) for participating in a far reaching scandal that opened accounts, over a period of years, for Wells Fargo bank customers who didn't know that additional bank services were being opened in their names though they were being charged for these services.

The CEO and chairman of the board of Wells Fargo – one of the too big to fail banks that got its wrist slapped in the mortgage crisis that threw the world into financial chaos a few years ago – the CEO appeared last week before a Senate investigation and dangled like a pinata before a bi-partisan panel.

The senators found themselves in rare unanimity if not disbelief as the chairman lamely tried to explain a plan that defrauded thousands of customers of millions of dollars to meet unrealistic sales goals imposed on bank employees; the phony accounts drove up the bank's stock and in turn resulted in senior executive bonuses in the tens of millions of dollars. But what also happened besides thousands of bank employees losing their jobs was that thousands of bank customers were caught in a vicious financial undertow resulting in real life suffering from mortgage foreclosures to plummeting credit scores. ⁱ

Then on the heels of the Wells Fargo fiasco came the indictment of Governor Cuomo's top aides and some of Western New York's premier developers for allegedly rigging the system of bidding and awarding of contracts for the \$750 million Solar City manufacturing plant.

The rigged bidding was a bold but poorly disguised way of rewarding donors who made large gifts to the governor's re-election campaign.

Such scandals says Steven Walt of Harvard University reflect a broader moral disease afflicting us: "Ruling elites in many liberal societies and especially the United States," he writes, "[operate freely] where money and special interests have created a corrupt [government and business leaders who are] out of touch with ordinary people, interested in mostly in enriching themselves, and immune to accountability."ⁱⁱ

Antiquity, we know, was no less gilded and greedy than modernity. Not surprisingly the bible addresses wealth and the management of wealth. And, as if on cue, given the week's headlines, we have today's parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man. The story was offered originally as an antidote to the same moral disease and blindness afflicting the first century church that Steven Walt says plagues our time.

Jesus is going to Jerusalem to confront the dark forces. In reaction to his mission to expose their fraudulent theology, they challenge him at every turn.

Last week his parable about the dishonest manger angered the religious leaders. Today he addresses the question of money again and re-

jects the official interpretation of the Law of Moses that justified the accumulation of wealth at the expense of the poor.

Luke tips us off at the start that the religious and political leaders are “lovers of money”; then he has Jesus tell them that though they seek to justify themselves in the sight of others, God, who sees through their charade, regards them as an abomination.

If ever there was any doubt about mixing politics and religion or economics and religion Jesus removes that doubt by taking off the gloves today.

The story of the Rich Man and Lazarus counters the Pharisee’s argument and centuries old interpretation of the biblical view of money and morality.

I use the phrase ‘moral disease and blindness’ advisedly. Other commentaries use the word “sin” which has become a loaded term from its association with the use of religion as a way to manipulate and enforce social conformity rather than as a way of helping us gain self-awareness that leads to authentic and transformed living.

The word disease aptly describes the moral illness and blindness of Jesus’ day and ours. Webster says disease is “any harmful or destructive condition.’ The love of money and the corruption of the spirit it causes and evil it leads to is a disease by any definition. A 19th century Anglican bishop, well acquainted with affluence commenting on the parable, distinguishes between the two diseases that afflict the main characters. Lazarus suffers from a physical disease that causes his wretched condition and ultimate physical death.

But the Rich Man suffers from a disease which infects his soul or spirit; its symptoms are contempt of the poor and luxurious squandering on self – the running sores, if you will, of *his* affliction. Since he does not have a faith in that which cannot be seen, he finds his only hope in that which he can see, and handle, and taste, and smell. It matters not whether he hoards like the rich fool or squanders like the prodigal son, either way, he places his trust and ultimate security in the things of the world.

The Rich Man’s wealth-obsession has so distorted his vision that he fails to even see Lazarus whom he must step over every day to come and go to his home; he is simply blind to the physical plight and suffering of the beggar at his gate.

Blindness and moral decay are apt descriptions of the crimes of the executives at Wells Fargo and the alleged scheming of the senior advisors to Governor Cuomo.

As Jesus’ parable unfolds we learn that the root of the Pharisees’ disease is biblical and theological; Jesus has already separated God and mammon – just last week he said, ‘you cannot serve God and mammon, either you will love the one and despise the other or be devoted to one and hate the other.’ The Pharisees, however, have comfortably joined God and money; they quote Deuteronomy 28 that says, ‘if you obey God you will be blessed in war, in the market place, in the field and at home.’ What Jesus takes issue with is not Deuteron-

omy 28 (remember he said the Law is the Law, no one can rewrite it) rather he takes issue with the Pharisees self-serving interpretation. Though the Pharisees justified their theological interpretation by the giving of alms and acts of charity; their philanthropic generosity came out of their abundance. When the Mellon family built a city block long gothic cathedral in Pittsburgh it cynically became known as “Mellon’s fire escape” – spiritual insurance to cover the sins of the family as they established a banking and industrial empire on the backs of overworked, underpaid immigrants.

Jesus says to the industrial giants of his time: God perceives what is really going on, and guess what, God isn’t pleased.

The parable’s moment of truth comes when the Rich Man who embodies the Pharisees’ reading of Deuteronomy 28 as evidence of God favoring him over the suffering Lazarus, now finds himself judged by the very Scriptures he uses to justify his villa and Lamborghini. Such misinterpretation of material blessing is the core message of the gospel of wealth that still plays very here in the US.

It is significant that the Rich Man is a faithful believer and elder of his church – what would the point of the story be if he was merely a godless first century retail mogul. A man whose wealth was taken as evidence of God’s favor, is a man with whom the Pharisees can identify.

The love of wealth is a clear violation of the Law of Moses which specifically requires that the harvest be shared with the poor and transient and instructs, “You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor in the land.”

If the Law is not ambiguous neither are the prophets: ‘Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?’ Jesus neither wants nor needs to change anything about the Law; its ethics and instruction regarding the management of wealth and the poor are clear crystal clear.

The parable could have ended with verse 26 referring to the wide chasm between the Rich Man and Abraham; but given the dictates of Scripture and purpose of Jesus’ mission it must continue and does in painful detail.

Jesus puts in metaphorical terms the consequences of the Rich Man’s spiritual disease: now in the life of eternity which he has inherited, he begs for water and gets none; he wants someone to warn his brothers and is told his brothers have the Scriptures to guide them; he replies that Scripture alone will not change them and pleads that if someone raised from the dead returns to warn his brothers then they would believe; finally, he is told that if his brothers do not listen to the law and prophets they will not believe if someone is raised from the dead.

Indeed, when Jesus raises his friend Lazarus, later in Luke's gospel, nothing changes except that the religious leaders are more motivated to find a way to put him to death.

What does the parable say to us? It is a story that took place long ago and a story that still inoculates against the moral disease and blindness that afflicted Luke's congregation; a story that can open our eyes to the Lazarus' in this community, and heal our hearts from the icy grip of privilege and power that paralyzed the Rich Man.

Perhaps you heard about or attended the town hall meeting this past Thursday at the Erie County Public Library sponsored by the New York Council for the Humanities and titled, "The Economics of Segregation."

After decades of decline Buffalo's recent resurgence is attracting a wave of developers, investors and homeowners. Yet, we remain one of the most segregated cities in the nation. African Americans are overlooked and pushed aside by recent economic developments after being hit hardest by decades of economic decline. The intersection of economics, housing and public policy could make our resurgence look like little more than 'gentrification.'

But here's the question the parable raises: must economic growth come at the expense of one group over another? What are the costs of segregation, for the oppressed and all of society? How can we develop economically and socially so that all residents of Western New York share in the renaissance going on in Buffalo?

This is, for the church, not just a theoretical discussion but a conversation that has eternal consequences for anyone who claims to follow Jesus and place their trust in the Bible and the God of creation.

I was talking recently with an architect hired to consult with a prominent church in Western New York. Included in his proposal was making the building handicapped accessible – starting with an expensive chair lift. Speaking for the committee overseeing renovations, one pillar of the church said, "That's fine but we don't need a chair lift here because no one in this church is handicapped." To which the young architect replied, "Of course, you don't have any handicapped members, Henry, they have no way of getting in the building."

As I reflected on that church leader's comment it occurred to me that his view of the church included no Lazarus's, no people of disability unable to get in the building, and my hunch is, given the resistance of the church to diversity, the operating definition of church for many privileged white congregations includes no Lazarus's who are gay, lesbian or transgender, few if any living at or below the line of poverty and certainly no Lazarus's of color.

The question is not theoretical – what would we do if a handicapped or any other Lazarus showed up at the door? It is practical and real – why aren't the handicapped people in this community here on Sunday morning?

If we see and define the church as only what it looks like today; chances are we suffer from the Rich Man's blindness. Gratitude for being here is a start but then we must ask: what is the social,

economic equivalent of installing a chair lift in this church? Are we fulfilling the requirement of the Law and Prophets and Jesus himself to love God and serve our neighbor? Amen.

ⁱ Michael Corkery, "Wells Fargo Chief Endures a Senate Committee's Bipartisan Wrath," *New York Times*, September 21, 2016, B1.

ⁱⁱ Roger Cohen, "The Age of Distrust," *New York Times*, September 20, 2016, A23.