

“Family Heirlooms”

“If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone rises from the dead.”

Of all the items handing on the walls of my office, the one that has the most special meaning is the needlepoint that hung in my grandparents’ home for many years. When my father’s mother passed away, the family began the process of emptying her house and dividing her estate. As one of 25 grandchildren, I had no expectation of receiving anything; so I have both surprised and honored when this family heirloom was entrusted to me. It has hung in the office of every congregation I have served since 1984, a tangible connection to the family who nurtured me in the faith and life of which this heirloom is a constant witness.

An heirloom is different from other items we possess; it is *“a family possession handed down from generation to generation.”* It is not something we have earned, nor is it something that is strictly ours; it is entrusted to us for a time with the understanding that one day we will pass it on to someone else. No one is the owner of an heirloom; we are the caretakers, the stewards of these treasured possessions that truly belong to our family, tangible reminders of the ties that bind us together by blood and in love. Unlike the degrees I have earned or other items that hang in my office, this heirloom is entrusted to me with the understanding that one day I will pass it on to the next generation of the Laustsen family.

There appears to be some confusion in the rich man in today’s Gospel lesson in his understanding of his possessions. Jesus introduces him as *“a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day.”* (Luke 16:19). The rich man is not named, but is traditionally identified as “Dives” (Latin for “rich”). The measure of this man’s wealth is illustrated by his conspicuous consumption – his dress and his diet. There is no mention as to how he acquired his wealth, nor is there any judgment against him because he is rich. Indeed, the Bible does not condemn anyone merely because they have great possessions; Paul’s often-misquoted statement in 1 Timothy does not state that money is the root of all evil, but that *“the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.”* (6:10). What Jesus’ parable will make clear is that the glitter of the rich man’s life is superficial and transient, and has blinded him from recognizing both the source of his wealth and his responsible use of what has been entrusted to him. This becomes clear when we are introduced to the other major character in the parable: *“And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores.”* (16:20-21). Lazarus is the only character in Jesus’ parables that is given a name, a dignity that is denied him in a life filled with misery and deprivation. He is one of the faceless, nameless persons who has been cast off and discarded by society; tragically, no one helps Lazarus, and he dies of starvation and disease at the rich man’s gate, a short distance from the opulence of the rich man’s table.

All this will suddenly change as the parable moves into its second act, when *“the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried.”* (16:22). Lazarus is transported by angels to the bosom of Abraham, which was regarded as the place of highest bliss; *“neglected by others, Lazarus is prized in the sight of God.”* (Alan Culpepper). The rich man, on the other hand, finds himself in Hades, the place where the dead awaited final judgment. This turn of events would have surprised many in Jesus’ original audience, who would have expected that the blessings that the rich man enjoyed in life were a sign of God’s favor, while illness, poverty, and hardship were signs of God’s displeasure. But it would also have reminded them that the law of Moses specifically required that the harvest be shared with the poor and the transient (*“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your*

vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the LORD your God." – Leviticus 19:9-10), as well as the prophet's teaching on how God's people were to share that with which they had been blessed with others, especially those in need:

- "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, and 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?" – Isaiah 58:6-7.

In the midst of his torments in Hades, the rich man looks up and "*saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side.*" (16:23). Three exchanges between the rich man and Abraham follow; Lazarus never says anything. The rich man's first request is for Abraham to "*send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.*" (16:24). He still regards Lazarus as someone whose place is to serve his personal needs; but the chasm that now separates the rich man and Lazarus confirms the finality of the judgment on the rich man (as Clarence Jordan once proclaimed, "*Lazarus ain't gonna run no mo'yo' errands, rich man!*"). As Abraham will confirm, the rich man had shut himself off from Lazarus, and now no one can reach him:

- "But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.'" – 16:25-26.

Realizing that all hope for him is lost, the rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his five brothers, "*so that they will not also come into this place of torment.*" (16:28); if there is no hope for him, at least he will be able to intervene and spare his brothers. While he thinks of someone other than himself for the first time, he still assumes that Lazarus will serve as his "errand boy." But Abraham once again refuses to acquiesce to the rich man's requests, pointed them to what has already been taught in "*Moses and the prophets*":

- "If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor." – Deuteronomy 15:7.
- "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion – to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit." – Isaiah 61:1-3.

Abraham's command is "*they should listen to them*," a third-person imperative with no English equivalent. The rich man responds with a lament that indicates his despair that there is little hope that his brothers will heed the Scriptures: "*No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.*" (16:30). His last hope for them is that if someone were to go to them from the dead, they would repent. But Abraham is not swayed by this lament: "*If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.*" (16:31).

- "There will be no special dispensation for those who refuse the needs of the wretched at their gates. If they will not hear the Scriptures and be merciful, they show that they have placed themselves beyond the reach of God's mercy." – Culpepper.

The circumstances that led the rich man to his dismal fate were not due to the fact that he had wealth; wealth can be used for great good, as we have seen in philanthropic efforts over the years that have greatly benefited many people. The problem was that his wealth became the central focus of his life, to the point where it blinded him to the needs of others, especially a destitute man living outside his front door. As St Paul teaches Timothy in today's second lesson, it is "*the love of money [that] is the root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.*" (1 Timothy 6:10). Above all, the rich man failed to realize that his wealth was not his to do as he pleased; it was a trust, an heirloom, something that had been placed in his care by someone else for him to use responsibly and to pass on to the next generation. He failed to heed Paul's words as to the responsibility that is placed upon those to whom much has been given:

- "As for those in the present age who are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life." – 1 Timothy 6:17-19.

The rich man had fallen into the trap that Amos speaks against in his prophetic ministry. Amos was a prophet from the southern kingdom who is sent by God to the northern kingdom to proclaim God's judgment against those who used their wealth for their own selfish purposes, and who saw their riches as a sign of God's favor. He proclaims the word of the Lord that condemns the wealthy for the manner in which they gained their riches:

- "Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins – you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate." – Amos 5:11-12.

Amos' words of judgment are particularly harsh on the members of the *marzeah*, a social and religious institution for the wealthy that owned buildings and vineyards, and whose chief activity seemed to be gatherings for feasts that might last for several days, with excessive drinking. This luxury was gained at the expense of other people's misery; it deadened the mind and the senses to responsibility:

- "Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall; who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, and like David improvise on instruments of music; who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph! Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile, and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away." – Amos 6:4-7.

What ties all of these lessons together is one of the central teachings of our faith that is summed up in a hymn that we will sing in a few weeks as we gather to celebrate the Day of Thanksgiving: "*All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above. We thank you, Lord, we thank you, Lord, for all your love.*" (ELW Hymn 681). Rather than merely considering certain items to be heirlooms that have been placed in our care, our faith recognizes that *everything* we possess is an heirloom entrusted to us as God's family by our Heavenly Father. Martin Luther teaches us in the *Small Catechism* that when we confess the words of the first article of the Apostles Creed ("*I believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth.*") we are affirming that not only did God create the universe at the beginning of time, but that God is still involved in creation and provides us with everything we need:

- “God has given me and still preserves my body and soul: eyes, ears, and all limbs and senses; reason and all mental faculties. In addition, God daily and abundantly provides shoes and clothing, food and drink, house and farm, spouse and children, fields, livestock, and all property – along with all the necessities and nourishment for this body and life. God protects me against all danger and shields and preserves me from all evil. And all this is done out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all.”

At the heart of our faith is this sure and certain knowledge that “*this is my Father’s world*,” and all that we have is an heirloom that has been given to us simply because we are God’s beloved children. We may have worked very hard for what we possess, but we also acknowledge that our ability to perform certain tasks and the strength to do so are also gifts from God who has given us the talents and skills to work for our own benefit as well as for the benefit of others. We may have devoted countless hours to that we harvest in this season, but it is the Lord of the harvest that makes it all possible. The eyes of faith give us the ability to see that all we have is a blessing that God has showered upon us, an heirloom that has been placed in our care; because of this, our response is that “*we owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true.*”

As we are preparing to celebrate the Day of Thanksgiving in a few weeks, we are called to consider what it means to care for the family heirlooms that encompass all that we possess – “*ourselves, our time, and our possessions, signs of [God’s] gracious love.*” We are reminded that the offerings we present to God in worship are a mere portion of all that God has entrusted into our care; for “*we give thee but thine own, whate’er the gift may be; all that we have is thine alone, a trust, O Lord, from thee.*” (ELW Hymn 686). We are called to see all of our lives of faith as being devoted to faithful stewardship, an oft-used but misunderstood word in the life of the church. Stewardship is far more than an annual fundraising appeal or yearly encouragement to generous giving to support the work of the church; stewardship is a recognition that all we have is truly a blessing from God, and we are the caretakers – the *stewards* – entrusted to care for that which truly belongs to the Lord of the Church and all creation. It is “*to know that with all that we are and all that we have we are God’s stewards*” (Hanns Lilje).

- “Stewardship must be understood first as descriptive of the being – the very life – of God’s people. Deeds of stewardship arise out of the being of the steward … We are able to love and to perform deeds of love because we have been loved (1 John 4) … Real and effective deeds of stewardship will occur only when persons hear that gospel and are moved by that Spirit that changes their *being*, lifting them from the sloth of irresponsibility or judging their pride of mastery and given them a new being – the being of stewards.” – Douglas John Hall, *The Steward*.

Had the rich man looked upon his wealth through the eyes of a steward, he would have seen that his possessions were not his to squander on selfish pursuits but an heirloom to be used wisely and shared with others – especially the man on the other side of his gate. Looking upon all that we possess through the eyes of stewardship, we are called to be careful managers of what God has entrusted to us – both as individual Christians and as the Church of Jesus Christ – and commit ourselves to using these resources for the purposes God intended them. Entrusted with these heirlooms as God’s family, we are called to use them wisely and faithfully; for stewardship “*is everything I do after I say ‘I believe.’*”

My grandmother’s needlepoint will continue to have a special place in my office, and I will strive to care for it as the family heirloom that has been placed into my care. As the family of God in this place, may we seek to be faithful stewards of this heirloom that God has placed in our care, so that through all that we say and all that we do others may know the love of God that is our true heirloom, the blessings that God entrusts to all of us in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.