

“Conspicuous Consumption: #firstworldproblems”

Luke 16: 10-16, 19-31

It seems like I am always telling you this but once again, I struggled with this text. I struggled partly because this text deals with such a sensitive topic- money and partly because it is a parable. You see with parables, things are left neat and tidy at the end of the story. Rather, parables leave things messy. Parables leave us wondering and guessing. Parables leave us with the future unknown. All things, a Type A person like me, doesn't like.

So if truth be told, I'd rather have a good old Bible story any day over a parable. With most Bible stories, there is a beginning, a middle and an end, very much like the stories I love to read with Hannah and Jonathan. Right now, most of the stories that we are reading together end with “And they all lived happily ever after.” See, neat and tidy. All questions answered. We know the story ends. The princess gets her prince and true love wins in the end.

But with parables, we get these cryptic sayings, and usually we are left with more questions than what we had when we first started reading them. It seems as if parables always leave us with more wonderings and guesses than any other type of story in the Bible.

So I'm being completely honest when I tell you that I can usually stick with Jesus when the story is about healing someone or making them whole once more. But he sure does leave me puzzled and confused when he starts talking in parables.

So yes, I am telling you once again, that I struggled with a particular text. But to be honest, I think my struggling really came from the fact that I didn't like how I felt when I read this particular parable. When I first heard these words, I felt convicted. I felt looked down upon. I felt...well, guilty. Guilty over all the times that I walked by someone who was homeless and didn't give them money. Guilty over all the excuses that I had told myself just to make me feel better as I walked by that person. Guilty over all the times that I did ignore the person right outside my gate. In reading this parable, I felt guilty.

This text, all this past week, made me feel like a horrible, bad, awful person. And those are not exactly the feelings that we want to have when we read the Scriptures nor are they the ones we want to have pushed upon us when we come to church. But there they were. And if the initial guilt wasn't bad enough, these feelings got compounded each day as I started reflecting about my own problems, you know, the ones like I ran out of Café Mocha for the Keurig. Or Mike left a dribble in the milk container and I didn't feel like running to the Corner Grocery so I didn't get to have my morning cereal. Or problems like Starbucks wasn't serving the pumpkin lattes yet when I went in to have my daily shot of caffeine. You

know, all those first world problems that in the grand scheme of things are so minor and selfish when compared to the problems of people around the world, heck, compared to the problems of some people right here in our very own community, people who are wondering where their next meal is going to come from, or people who are wondering how they are going to pay their bills when they are barely making minimum wage or are facing mounting medical debts. My first world problems of whether I want Fruit Loops or Apple Jacks are so minor compared to the problems of people who are wondering how they are going to take care of their child so that their child doesn't have to go to bed hungry again tonight.

Yeah, I know, right?! Ouch! Sometimes, it is just not easy to have Kingdom of God shoved right in front of your face. Sometimes it is so much easier to pretend all that stuff doesn't exist, that it doesn't involve me or that all that stuff like hunger, poverty, the ever widening gap between the rich and the poor, all that stuff is happening somewhere else and not in our own community so that I could go back to living in my own bubble, worrying about my own first world problems like My Kindle isn't holding its charge, so did I get another one or go for the iPad?

Somehow as I read this text over and over again, the guilt just wouldn't go away and it began to set in more and more each and every day for me. And I couldn't help but think maybe that's exactly what Jesus wants to us feel when we

read these words. Maybe Jesus wants our collective conscious as a community of faith, as individuals, as the people of God, to keep repeating-“And you think you’ve got problems. There is food in the pantry, gas in the car, clothes to spare in the closet, and money in the bank. Really how bad is your life?” I know right? Ouch!

So, yeah, maybe Jesus does want us to feel a little guilty when we read this text so that then maybe we will start looking at the world, not from our viewpoint but from God’s and realize that we don’t like what we see. Maybe Jesus does want us to feel uncomfortable when we read this text, so that we will stop about complaining about our first world problems and actually do something about the real problems in this world. Maybe Jesus really does want us to struggle with this text until we can stand it no longer because then and only then we will actually do something about the injustices that this text addresses and brings to our attention.

Now before we get into a big debate on whether the church should guilt people into doing stuff, let me give you some background about this text and share why I came to the surprising conclusion that guilt is not always such a bad thing.

I say this statement, knowing that we have all heard sermons about money and how money is the root of all evil but that is not what the Bible actually says. That line, “money is the root of all evil” is one of the most misquoted lines from the Bible of all time. Really, the line says, “the love of money is the root of all

evil”. Don’t believe me. Look it up. 1 Timothy 6: 10. I’ll pause for a moment while we all check the pew bibles in front of us.

Money is not and has never been the problem. And really in the Bible, Jesus never had a problem with either rich people or money. Yes, I know that there is that line about how it is easier for a camel to make it through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to get into heaven. And yes, I know Jesus talked to the young rich man and told him to sell all his possessions and follow him to which the young man responded by crying. And then Jesus said to the disciples See, I told you so!

I know all that is in the Bible but I’m going to tell you again. Money and rich people are not what gets Jesus all fired up. What really gets Jesus going is when people use the Scriptures to gain privilege over other people, especially when people would listen to Jesus talk about the gospel of abundance and instead of hearing about God’s abundance of grace; they would hear that God was going to bless them with wealth. But that’s not what Jesus says at all in any of Gospels. In fact, there is a big difference between the health and wealth gospel that our culture has embraced and the abundance gospel that Jesus actually taught.

No Jesus doesn’t have a problem with money or rich people. What Jesus does have a problem with is when his words are distorted and then they are used to keep other people down. He doesn’t like that at all. That’s why he tells this parable in the first place, to remind the Pharisees, people who knew the law inside and out

that although they knew the words of the law, they had forgotten the heart of the message. They had become lovers of money, not lovers of God's people.

Through this parable, Jesus was reminding the Pharisees and us today, that we can't pick and choose which Scriptures we want to follow. There has to be some consistency in the texts that we hold sacred and our actions as people of God. And that consistency has always been and should always be for us as the people of God to look after the poor, to speak up for justice, to take care of those who are broken and in need of healing, and most importantly to see all as made in the image of God.

That's the whole message of the Bible summed up in a nutshell. When we look at Word of God as a whole, both Old Testament and New Testament, time and time again, it tells us to love our neighbor as God loves us. Time and Time again, our Scriptures tell us to care for the poor, the widow, and the orphan. Time and time again, our Scriptures, from Genesis, to the prophets, to the Gospels and the Epistles and all the crazy stuff in between, our Scriptures tell us that we are called to do justice. We are to work to bring about the Kingdom of God here on earth, where all are feed, where all are loved, where all are clothed, where all are made well, where all are noticed and embraced as a child of God.

No, Jesus never had a problem with rich people. Jesus never had a problem with money. What Jesus had a problem with was when we as the people of God

allow our love of money to distort our vision so much that we begin to lose sight of the Kingdom of God being realized here on earth.

Think about it. When we only think of getting ahead, when we only think of my wants, when we only think about me, me, me, we begin to distort the Word of God. We begin to lose our focus on the wider picture, the picture that reminds us that we are part of the whole Body of Christ here on earth and all are created in the image of God and all should be seen and treated as such.

It is so easy to focus on me and my wants, notice I didn't say needs, but my wants, when I allow myself to be ruled by the love for the almighty dollar. Once we go down that slippery slope, soon we don't care who we hurt, who we crush, who we betray, who we use, just as long as we get ahead.

That's not the way of the Scriptures. That's not the way of the Kingdom of God. And it is certainly not the way we are called to live as the people of God here on earth in our local and global communities.

So, the issue isn't money or rich people. In the story, Jesus doesn't find fault with the rich man for being rich nor does he blame Lazarus for being poor. He doesn't find fault with either man because truth be told, this story is not about class warfare. It is about the sin of consumption. It is about the sin of apathy. It is about the sin of ignorance and cultural blindness.

You see, the rich man's sin was not that he had money. His sin was that he ignored Lazarus, whom he passed by every day. Not once did the rich man ever see Lazarus as a real live human, see him as a child of God, see him broken and in need. The rich man only saw Lazarus as something, not somebody but something that wasn't even worth the scraps off his table.

No, money is not the problem. In fact, money has never been the problem. The real problem, since the beginning of time, has always been how the world, how we as individuals, how we as the church, how we as a culture have let the love of money distort our vision and we have allowed ourselves to lose sight of the Kingdom God.

The love of money has created a great chasm in our world, a great chasm between the use and abuse model of getting ahead in this world and the reality of having the Kingdom of God made real here on earth for all people, for all of God's children.

So yeah, maybe it is okay that we do feel guilty when we read this text. Maybe it is okay that we do struggle with this text. Maybe it is okay that we are uncomfortable when we hear this text. Because it tells us we need to remember that there is something better than me and you, and our wants, to remember that the Kingdom of God is too important for us, for the world, to allow it to be lost or forgotten. We need all those things, like guilt, like struggling with difficult texts

and what they call us to do. We need the feeling of being uncomfortable when we realize that we fall short, we need all those things to remind us that we have been transformed by the love and grace of God, and that now that we've experienced the abundance of these amazing things, we cannot and we will not stand for the injustices of the world to continue.

So yeah, maybe it is okay to feel a little guilty when we remember all those times we walked by and didn't help. It helps us remember that the Kingdom of God isn't just about me and my wants nor is it meant to just make us feel better about ourselves. The Kingdom of God has always been about the reign of God being realized here on here, a Kingdom where the poor will be blessed, the hungry feed, the naked clothed, and the sick cared for and made well, a Kingdom where all are seen as valuable for who they are, not for what their net assets are in the bank, a Kingdom where all are seen as children of God.

We cannot sit here and deny that there is not a great chasm between the haves and the have nots, that there is not a great chasm between the rich and the poor. We know that there is, There is a great chasm between realization of the Kingdom of God here on earth and this world that is driven by the love of money. There is a great chasm and God is trying every which way to break it down but we keep building it back up, brick by brick.. We keep building it back up brick by brick, with our first world problems, with our conspicuous consumption, and with

our distorted vision of what will really bring peace to this world. We keep building it back up because it is easier to ignore the problems than to allow ourselves to be affected by someone's suffering, than to allow ourselves to see Lazarus sitting at our gate, begging for food, with only the dogs to clean his sores.

And as I say all this, I'm not sure I have all the answers. I'll admit that this transformation will not be easy. We are so used to rat race of this world and it is hard to change. But as I draw to a close, I want to share two stories that began the process of helping me embrace my guilt, that began to help me see beyond the great chasm to the true vision of what life here on earth could truly be if I would only open my eyes to the suffering around me.

The first story: a pastor shared an experience of a mission trip where he and his youth group had a chance to go to a homeless shelter to serve some meals to the residents there. And while doing this, the group had a chance to talk with some of the men. Someone in the group asked what to do when a person on the street approached them for money. And the pastor was shocked by the resident's answer. The gentleman said, Well you should do what you feel like doing. And if you give money, be fully aware that it may be used for food but just as well it may be used for something else. And then the gentleman said, "Follow your gut. You make that decision. Say yes or say no but treat me like a person. We spend our whole day not being seen. Don't act like we aren't there!"

And the second story: There was a newspaper article recently about how a photographer had taken some extraordinary beautiful photos while on vacation in LA. Of course there would be photos on vacation but these photos were not of movie stars or palm trees. These photos were up close and personal photos of the homeless in LA., an invisible population that he captured in strikingly beautiful high definition portraits that explored every facet of their faces.

As I looked at these hauntingly beautiful photos, I just couldn't turn away. The people's eyes captured my attention and they drew me in. Every wrinkle told a story of good times and bad. And as I stared at these images, I couldn't help but think I wanted to know the people as individuals and not just some statistics. I wanted to hear their stories. I wanted to have a connection with these people, people who I would probably just walk by on the street and pretend that I didn't hear their cries.

In that moment, while staring at those photos, the great chasm was crossed for just a little while and I realized something, something amazing. I realized that in the words of Martin Luther King, "true compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. True Compassion understands that an edifice or system which produces beggars needs restructuring." True compassion understands that money is not the problem but rather how we have let the love of money distort our vision of

the Kingdom of God. True compassion is an invitation to view the world and our actions from God's point of view and realize that we don't like what we see.

May we always remember each and every day that it is not about our first world problems. Rather it is about the Kingdom of God where the poor will be blessed, the hungry fed, the sick cared for and heal, and where all are seen as children of God. Amen.