

Advent Lutheran Church
Living Richly
March 30, 2025
Luke 16:19-31

Ushers, please close the doors to the sanctuary. In fact, go ahead and secure all of the exits. I need you to stand guard for a few minutes.

Siblings in Christ, now that I have your full attention, I'd like to invite you to give. More specifically, it is time for everyone to take out \$20. Please have your money ready to give when the offering plates are passed.

Except for the folks in leadership. You all can put your \$20 bills away. I need you to step up and give \$100 each.

Does this sound ridiculous? Are you wondering if your pastor has lost his mind?

Actually, I'm sharing a story from the 109th Pentecostal Assemblies of the World Convention that took place in Baltimore. While the event occurred in 2024, it went viral this week.

The video clip features Pastor and Grammy-nominated Gospel artist Marvin Sapp instructing the ushers to do as I instructed ours to do before telling 1,000 in person attendees and 1,000 people participating online to each give \$20. And only after doing so does he instruct leaders to give \$100.¹

Confused? Angry? Perplexed? Or are you simply saddened that this is how the topic of money was handled in a gathering of people who follow the Way of Jesus?

¹ See Demicia Inman. "Marvin Sapp Instructs Ushers To Close Church Doors Until Congregation Ponies Up \$40K," March 27, 2025 - www.vibe.com/news/entertainment/marvin-sapp-closes-church-congregation-gives-40k-1235057187/ and Charmaine Patterson. "Marvin Sapp Denies 'Holding People Hostage,'" March 28, 2025 - <https://people.com/marvin-sapp-denies-holding-people-hostage-when-telling-ushers-to-close-the-doors-while-collecting-church-offering-11705502>

Or maybe you are hoping this is a one-of-a-kind oddity or an isolated incident that we can easily dismiss. Unfortunately, it is not.

Paula White-Cain, a Florida Pastor and Senior Advisor to the newly created White House Faith Office, was also in the news this week. Instead of requesting \$20 or even \$100, she called upon her listeners to consider a donation of \$1,000.

Last Sunday, she invited people to give a special gift as part of a Passover – Easter – Resurrection campaign. Larger gifts receive larger rewards. Those giving gifts of \$1,000 or more were promised seven supernatural blessings and some religious swag, including a Waterford crystal cross.²

This has been quite a week – and that is just my commentary on church fundraising.

Pastor Marvin and Pastor Paula are very different people. They both, however, happen to be 58 years of age. And, their recent activities invite us to think about money.

Many of you came to church this morning with money on your mind knowing that following worship we will gather for a town hall style meeting focused on Advent's finances. And, I heard from a few of you that you find such frank talk about money to be downright uncomfortable.

I wonder then what you think of this morning's Gospel lesson. It is certainly a challenging passage. And, we likely resonate with the rich man – not because of what happens to him but because of his economic position. The reality is that by global standards, nearly all of us gathered here are rich.

So why is Jesus picking on us today? Well, if we back up a bit, just before today's passage in verses 13 and 14 we gain some important context. Jesus had just told the Pharisees – a group

² See Jim Burklo. "Buy Seven Blessings Now!," March 26, 2025 - <https://um-insight.net/perspectives/buy-seven-blessings-now/> and Jordan King. "Donald Trump's Spiritual Advisor Faces Christian Backlash," March 25, 2025 - <https://www.newsweek.com/paula-white-cain-christians-donald-trump-2050102>

labeled in the passage as people who loved money – that they cannot serve two masters.

Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.”³

And, so we come to today’s story. It isn’t a critique of having designer labels in your closet or significant financial resources. It is, instead, about whether you have money or whether money has you. It is a story about the danger of worshipping money.

We live in a society where the rich get richer and poor get poorer. The system is designed this way and is currently being modified to ensure that those who have the most can acquire even more.

When I hear this passage read and think about the rich man and his gated home, I remember my time in Southwest Florida. Susan and I lived in Naples for almost a decade and we resided in gated communities for the duration. For those not in the know, Naples is populated primarily by retirees with significant financial means.

Life within the walls and behind the gates was wonderful. There was a strong sense of community and there were ample amenities. And yet the isolation this way of living created also meant it was hard to see what was outside those walls and beyond the gates.

In our passage we encounter an unnamed well-to-do man and a named man who was anything but doing well. Notably Lazarus stands out because Jesus doesn’t name characters in his parables. Lazarus is an exception. You should know that his name means “God has helped.”

While those of you who have never visited Naples, Florida may have a hard time accurately picturing everyday life in its gated communities, nearly all of us have a hard time picturing what it was like to be an affluent person in the first century.

³ Luke 16:13-14, NIV.

For example, in that culture it was expected that the wealthy would give alms to the poor and one location where this occurred was just outside the gate.

Just beyond the gate of homes like that of this rich man sat a bench. And, on this bench Lazarus waited to receive his leftovers. Lazarus was starving only feet from where the rich man feasted.⁴

I wonder how it is that wealth and comfort blinded the rich man to the need that was literally just beyond his gate. And, I wonder how this condition is blinding us from truly seeing the needy all around.

God isn't asking us to give \$20 or \$100 or even \$1,000 or more today. God is asking us to do something much harder – to rethink our relationship with money.

This is a tough teaching for those who are financially wealthy. And it should be just as difficult for those here who have a relatively modest amount of money in the bank.

As we prepare to talk about finances in a few minutes at our town hall and then to launch our annual stewardship campaign next week, know that God doesn't need your money; God needs you. As we grow in our relationship with a generous God, we become more like God and cannot help but become more generous.

This morning's Gospel reading makes it clear that we have all that we need. God has revealed God's ways to us through the Bible and in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

And, for the last several weeks we've been hearing about love. We've been invited to lead loving lives. To put our love into action by stepping up like the Good Samaritan did or by stepping out like the Father did in the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

Now, we are invited once again to choose how we will live.

⁴ Kendra Mohn. "Commentary on Luke 16:19-31," September 25, 2022 - <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-26-3/commentary-on-luke-1619-31-8>

Will we make a real effort to truly see and genuinely love our neighbors, especially those that others choose not to see or label as less than? Will we do this close to home – sometimes so close that we help people right outside our front doors? And, will we be open to extending compassion wherever need arises even in places like Myanmar? ⁵

Will you? Will I? Will we together?

It is my hope and prayer that we will live richly today and for all the days yet to come.

Amen.

⁵ A 7.7 magnitude earthquake struck Myanmar on Friday, March 28, 2025 causing extensive damage. At the time of finalizing this sermon more than 1,600 people have died with the death toll expected to rise considerably in the coming days.