



Lazarus & the Rich Man” - Medieval fresco, Rila Monastery, Bulgaria

THE AFFLICTION OF AFFLUENCE: RECONCILING GRATITUDE, GENEROSITY AND GREED

INTRODUCTION

*"Dear God, you made many, many poor people.
I realize, of course, that it's no shame to be poor.
But it's no great honor either!
So, what would have been so terrible if I had a small fortune?"*

From Tevye's monologue, *Fiddler on the Roof*, Harnick & Bock, 1964

We all know the story of Tevye the poor peasant, who dreams of another life; with his own particular list of those things that constitute what would make him a wealthy man. For him, it includes ducks, chickens, turkeys and geese, a wife with a proper double chin, a big house all the neighbors would envy, and all the time in the world to discuss holy books with learned men.

But if you find the story terribly quaint, but hardly apropos to the kind of world we live in today, consider this: although the lyrics to Tevye's song are based on a short-story by a Russian Jew named Sholem Aleichem written in 1899, its original title has a much more contemporary ring to it. It was called, "The Bubble Bursts."

The common dream most people have of one day having more than they already have seems to have remained as fleeting and

elusive as ever. Meanwhile, the gross disparity and widening gap in this country between the *haves* and the *have-nots* has reached a point where an oligarchy of corporate interests posing as individuals shape public opinion and outspend each other as never before in partisan attempts to buy an election.

Along with the old adage about the rich getting richer --and the equally true and opposite reality (the poor get poorer) -- there is also the story of *reversal*. Fortunes are made and lost. And the moral tale is told again and again; where the truly fickle, stingy and self-absorbed types are easily afflicted with their reliance upon that which is fleeting, and not of ultimate value (that is, enduring or eternal).

What might the lottery winner and "The Donald" have in common? And, is it an affliction that may be more common than we might be led to believe?

RICH MAN, POOR MAN

*“Lord who made the lion and the lamb,
You decreed I should be what I am
Would it spoil some vast eternal plan
If I were a wealthy man?”*

Tevye’s further monologue

Wealth-X is the name of a company that describes itself as a “global ultra high net worth prospecting, intelligence and wealth due-diligence firm.” And if you understand what all that means you’re far more savvy in this regard than I. However, it recently released a report listing the richest person in each of these fifty United States; and that’s something even I can try to comprehend.

The report found that California and New York are the states with the highest number of mega-millionaires, but see if you can ace this quiz by naming these fellow citizens I suspect you actually don’t know on a first name basis (answers at the end of the Commentary):

- In first place, from Washington State, who is worth \$64.5 billion? Hint: they’ve given most of their billions away to the foundation they established in their own names.
- In second place, from Nebraska, who is worth \$49.6 billion? Hint: The Wizard has given most of his fortune away to #1’s foundation, and last month persuaded 11 more billionaires to give away at least half their wealth to the same philanthropic organization.
- And in California, in 3rd place, who is worth \$41.1 billion? Hint: Not only did he buy an Hawaiian island last June, and is sponsoring not one, but several boats in the America Cup race, he’s signed on to #2’s “Giving Pledge” promising to give away the majority of his wealth as well.

The correct answers can be found at the end of this commentary. Now, lest we think *Wealth-X* is simply all about money, it is apparently also a sponsor of something called the Global Poverty Project, with a goal of stamping out world hunger.

But if you do a Google search to see if there might be another site called something like *Poverty-X*, ranking the very *poorest* person in each state, you’ll come up empty; in part, perhaps, because there may just be too many nameless faces to count.

Perhaps that’s what makes the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus in Luke’s gospel so interesting. Jesus, his contemporaries, and later his would-be followers didn’t have a name for the rich man (It was not until the Latin Vulgate translation did the name Dives appear). But they all knew some wretched soul, who could have been named Lazarus; the one whose name means, “God is my help.”

THE PARABLE OF THE RICH MAN AND LAZARUS



Scene above: “Saint Lazarus” – Humbert von Echtermach (1028-1051) The story of Lazarus and the Rich Man was one of the most frequently illustrated parables in medieval art.

Text:

There was this rich man, who wore clothing fit for a king and who dined lavishly every day. This poor man, named Lazarus, languished at his gate, all covered with sores. He longed to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Dogs even used to come and lick his sores. It so happened that the poor man died and was carried by the heavenly messengers to be with Abraham. The rich man died too, and was buried.

From Hades, where he was being tortured, he looked up and saw Abraham a long way off and Lazarus with him. He called out, "Father Abraham, have pity on me! Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in torment in these flames."

But Abraham said, "My child, remember that you had good fortune in your lifetime, while Lazarus had it bad. Now he is being comforted here, and you are in torment. And besides all this, a great chasm has been set between us and you, so that even those who want to cross over from here to you cannot, and no one can cross over from that side to ours." [Luke 16:19-26]

Translation: Robert Funk, Roy Hoover & the Jesus Seminar

Scholars are divided as to the authenticity of the main story here as being original to Jesus. There were numerous such folk tales about the reversal of the fate of rich and poor circulating throughout the ancient Near East.

The retrospective epilogue which follows in verses 27-31 has the doomed rich man pleading to send a warning to his brothers who still might have a chance to change their ways. Too late, is the reply. The Law and prophets weren't sufficient; someone rising from the dead won't be persuasive either. This is clearly Luke's allegorical addition; written to reflect a resurrection motif by the early believing community.

However, the gist and tone of the main story is representative of Jesus' character, as Luke portrays him. The Galilean rabbi liked to draw such sharp contrasts, with a sense of apocalyptic urgency. There was often the reassurance there would be some sort of redress, and a restoration of a divinely sanctioned form of equitable justice. How one behaved towards one's neighbor counts;

whether it be care and compassion on the one hand, or indifference and disdain on the other. Besides, you can never be so sure you'll be able secure for yourself a place of privilege, or destitution.

ANOTHER PARABLE:

THE RICH MAN AND RICHARD

Nowadays, in the world of politics and social media, both the rich and the poor can be well known. Richard Hayes is a garbage collector whose route includes one of Mitt Romney's homes; in this case, his \$12 million La Jolla, California mansion.

Hayes recently appeared in one of the campaign ads deemed as being "negative." You know, it's one of those ads where they attempt to depict what they think is wrong with the other candidate, instead of what's positive with their own.

"My name is Richard Hayes, and I pick up Mitt Romney's trash," Hayes says to the camera in the 60-second Web ad. "We're kind of like the invisible people, you know. He doesn't realize, you know, that the service we provide, you know, if it wasn't for us, you know, it would be a big health issue, us not picking up trash."

Then Hayes continued, "Picking up 15, 16 tons by hand, you know that takes a toll on your body. When I'm 55, 60 years old, I know my body's going to be break down. Mitt Romney doesn't care about that. He seems only to be relaxed and at ease when he is surrounded by other millionaires and people willing to pay \$50,000 to share a meal with him."

So, we live in a country where one presidential candidate amassed a hefty fortune as a former venture capitalist. The estimated \$20 million dollars of income his investments generate for him each year frees up his time to pursue other interests, and contribute to society in other ways. For instance, he wants to be leader of the free world and, in his words, "help so many fellow Americans that are hurting." It isn't a question of his sincerity, just the best means of accomplishing the same goal both candidates share.

That other candidate? He was once a community organizer on Chicago's south side, with a Harvard law degree hanging on his wall. But now he's a multi-millionaire himself. He says he cares about the poor too; the majority of who are seen as an American middle class that's poorer than they once were.

One candidate wants to tax his own income bracket a little more; arguing the privileged 1% should be asked to contribute a little more; while the other argues it'll kill the likelihood of more jobs, because those who have so much more already will be *dis-incentivized* to risk what they've got for the sake of someone other than themselves. No one dares ask the obvious question why that is so. Both simply argue – from their completely opposite perspectives – that everyone will be better off if we choose what they propose.

But I know what they're talking about, because they're talking about me, and my inclination to hold on to everything I've got. Me? I'll admit it. I'm greedy. And the more I've got, the more I stand to lose.

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Chances are if you're reading this, you may not consider yourself to be part of the economic 1%. But at the same time, we're all likely part of a privileged 99%; relative, that is, to the rest of the world's inhabitants, where 1/6 lack such basic necessities of life like safe drinking water. Even in our own country, 15% of our neighbors live below what we – as a society – regard as a poverty line; including nearly 22% of our nation's children (U.S. Labor Dept stats).

As talk of lifting up an American middle class dominates the national political rhetoric, there is little in the stump speeches, or congressional debates, or the pundit's spin aimed at the nameless poor, who number in the millions.

There is a lot of talk of everyone having an equal shot at the American dream; and little talk of those who – for whatever reason -- miss that elusive mark; and, like old Lazarus, for whom greed is certainly not an affliction they risk contracting. Candidates like to claim the other's arithmetic doesn't add up; but here's an equation that truly doesn't work. It is hard to imagine we would ever have 99% at the economic top, and only 1% below.

Furthermore, in my lifelong journey discerning Jesus' message, it is hard to believe such an inverted pyramid scheme is what he meant by what he describes over and over again as reign of God; or abundant and eternal life, for that matter.

LANDSLIDE DEFEAT: JESUS' ILL-FATED CAMPAIGN

The biblical tradition is not only filled with a conglomeration of stories; but sometimes with seemingly conflicting messages, as well. In good times, the abundance of blessings are not only seen as a gift from God, but also reward for one's fidelity to God, and therefore one's deserving.

When times are bad, the children of God are the ones for whom God cares the most; the poor, the outcast, the exiled, the marginalized, the wayward losers in need of divine retrieval and return, revival, restoration and resurrection.

In the gospel traditions, Jesus is depicted as incessantly confronting the institutional and cultural forces of wealth and power that held sway over poverty, economic injustice and oppression. Though he often did it in very personal terms, his prophetic finger was clearly pointed at those entrenched in positions of both influence and affluence; afforded them by systems rigged in favor of their own self-interests. This included both the political systems of an Empire, as well as the entrenched institutions of the religious establishment. Sometimes his prophetic pronouncements were explicit; but more often than not, he was given to teaching in parables.

There's the parable about wise and foolish stewards charged with the wise investment of that which is never their own from the start; as well as the one about the wicked servants who attempt a hostile takeover by killing the heir to the vineyard. Nowadays, those who would claim "we built that entirely ourselves" would have a fit.

There's the parable about the landowner who chooses outrageous generosity over pay equity, when he decides to give those who only toiled an hour in the hot sun the same wages as those who labored all day. Nowadays, the unions would organize a walkout.

There's the parable about the rich fool who tears down his barns to build bigger ones, in order to store more than he needs; only to have his life that was entirely devoted to excess cut short, and rendered inconsequential in the end. Nowadays his heirs would secretly finance a super pac in order to retain exemption trusts and stave off any tax increases on capital gains.

And there's the parable about the rich young man who wanted to believe he'd done everything necessary to inherit something he worried he hadn't built himself; that is, "eternal life."

Who knows if it was a still, nagging voice that urged him to double check, and ask the itinerant rabbi whose local notoriety had preceded him. But when asked, Jesus' prescription for him was the one thing he found was too costly, and more than he was willing to pay. Extrapolating Jesus' reply from the canonical gospel's passage (Mk 10:17-30, Lk 10:25-28), I'd guess it went something like this:

"You've got just about everything," says Jesus. "You need only one more thing. It is the one thing standing in your way. You are so weighted down by all you've got, and all you've done to prove yourself worthy of being blessed with the abundance you've received, no matter how much your protesting would like to claim it's all yours, and yours alone. But it's suffocating you. It has become your impediment to knowing what abundant life is all about, and intended to be, here, now. It is your particular affliction. The cure for you? Give away all you've accumulated, and follow me, barefoot and penniless."

And the rich young man instead slunk away, his affliction well intact.

Finally, there's the parable of the nameless rich man and Lazarus, already mentioned earlier.

In the context in which Luke must have extrapolated the source material to retell and interpret this story, it's helpful to picture an early believing community that still felt the sting of defeat a generation earlier.

The best messianic candidate to come along in centuries of hopeful anticipation had been rejected by the religious hierarchy of their own tradition, and dispensed with as an insignificant rabble-rouser in a backwater province of the Empire. It was a landslide defeat.

In this context, it isn't difficult to understand how a *reversal-of-fortune* scenario would have subsequently appealed to the "base," particularly with the allegorical epilogue Luke adds about the fate of those contemporaries opposed to Luke's community (the brothers of the doomed and tormented soul languishing in hell), who had their own chance twice before with the Law and the prophet's warnings; in addition to the one who has risen again from the dead to utterly refute their continued mistreatment of God's children.

But in this gospel parable, it isn't the difference between the nameless rich man's wherewithal and Lazarus' utterly destitute condition; but rather the indifference of the one towards to the other's need for even mere subsistence (as depicted as the "crumbs" under the rich man's table).

Thus, it is the *disparity of indifference* that is as great as the consequential gap that cannot be breached, expressed in that reversal of fortune.

Call it disproportionate disparity, or excess beyond all reasonable measure of personal success, or a bubble of unreality. Wealth and poverty may be relative terms, but such relativity should not obfuscate God's intention for economic justice. Hence the divine reminder: Bubbles burst.

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The divine reminder? Bubbles burst.

MY AFFLUENT LIFE

I was named after my two grandfathers, *John* (Arthur) Haglun and (Floyd) *William* Bennison. Praise be to Allah, it could have one the other way ...

Both men were Midwest capitalists who were once living the good life in the Roaring 20's, in Minneapolis. When the bubble burst in '29, my mother's family lost the big grand house in which she was born.

My father's family eventually fared much better. Utilizing the available cheap labor force in desperate need of any kind of job, my other grandfather ran a successful construction business; building grain elevators and bridges on the Plains. He subsequently regarded the rise of union labor to be the ruination of the country, and refused to carry a dime in his pocket, because it bore the image of FDR and all the New Deal represented.

By the time I knew either of them as a young boy, my one grandfather had accumulated enough wealth to retire in his fifties, while the other spent the remainder of his days running a cigar stand in the lobby of a big downtown Minneapolis hotel.

Summer vacation as a boy was a week spent at my one grandfather's summer home on Lake Minnetonka. Winters were spent at their winter home in Coral Gables, Florida, motoring their big white Chrysler Imperial back and forth.

But that one week of summer vacation also always included a trek into the city on a hot, muggy August evening for supper with my other grandparents in their small second story apartment on Nicolet Avenue.

My namesake would sit in his armchair, puffing on his cigar, with the single oscillating fan at his feet, swirling the thick smoke around the room. Through a child's eyes, I never saw the disparity, or saw him as a broken man; though he certainly did not enjoy any degree of what one would call affluence.

My other relatively wealthy grandfather however was afflicted with hardening of the arteries. It really hampered his golf game, requiring an electric cart to get him around the links at the country club.

Turned out, of course, it was the result of all the rich foods my grandmother always prepared and dished up; with the dinner table that was always set to look like a royal banquet.

From my one grandfather I inherited a gold pocket watch with his name engraved on the back; along with the date of his high school graduation, 1912. I never use the watch. It's probably worth a handsome sum of money, but is of little use.

And, from the other grandfather, I inherited a silver cigar humidor, with his initials carved in the lid. I don't smoke. And so I use the humidor for a penny jar.

There's a parable here about relative wealth and poverty, affluence and modest means; along with the mental picture I still have of my two grandfathers in my memories. One is sitting in his lakeside lawn chair, reading the Wall Street Journal, and taking his ease. The other is puffing on a cigar, with a Panama straw hat and a cane, and little else.

Neither John Arthur nor Floyd William were truly poor. Each had a roof over their heads, and food on the table. Both lived, and loved,

and suffered with their own separate afflictions. Like each of us, I have a hunch they wrestled with a sense of gratitude for all they had, the joy of generosity that comes with some daring risk of willing dis-possession, and the human penchant to want more than you've got.

But it seems to whom much is given, there can be the greater risk of avarice; and a myopic concern for self, at the cost of losing sight of that ancient vision of a divine economy that is equitable and just.

"And they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid, for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken." Micah 4:4

[Answers to the Wealth-X quiz: Bill & Melinda Gates, Warren Buffet and Larry Ellison.]

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