

Luke 16:19-31; 1 Timothy 6:6-19

[Texts for Proper 21]

Brite Chapel

Rev. Dr. Katie Hays

September 24, 2013

“The Rich Man and Lazarus”

The room where I sit is on the second floor of a ginormous house in a posh Nashville neighborhood. When we arrived in the dark the night before and parked in the driveway beside a multi-car garage that looked not like a garage but like a house big enough for any reasonably sized family, we had to hike down the walkway under the branches of the late-blooming magnolia trees to reach the front entrance of the actual house, its massive, wrought-iron double doors at the top of a broad front porch lined with landscaped lushness.

One of my traveling companions looked back at the garage and whispered, wide-eyed, “Holy \$#!t, that wasn’t even the house!” We were greeted by our hosts at the door and shown the several bedrooms we were to occupy as guests for the next couple of nights, each with its own bath and a pile of plump towels for our use.

Now the room where I sit, like all the rooms in the house that I have seen so far, is filled with *objects of art*, paintings and sculptures and whimsical glass pieces in a riotous rainbow of colors; a sumptuous selection of comfortable and useful furniture constructed of the finest leathers and woods and textiles; multiple shelf feet of hardback books; and glossy issues of *House Beautiful* and *Southern Living* in inviting little stacks on the elegant end tables softly lit through antique lampshades. The nights we spend there will be deliciously enjoyable.

On the second evening, our host will break out a bottle of top-shelf bourbon, the cost of which we cannot guess, but our estimates of which will keep any of us from accepting a second glass. It all seems too much...and we love every minute of it.

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. 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.”

We are not exactly covered with sores, but sitting in one of the several guest rooms in the home of our patron it is a little hard to imagine ourselves in the role of the rich man. I am traveling with three young adults in their twenties, two of whom work for tips, all of whom gave up weekend shifts at their jobs and therefore sacrificed real income, to make a field trip with me to Nashville, one of our last stops on a participant-observer worship experience study tour that has taken us as far from Mansfield as Granbury and Dallas and Denton, but now has us crossing the Mississippi River to experience just one more, one more congregation with a reputation for transcendent worship and an exquisite aesthetic for multi-sensory magnetism toward the throne of God. And we have done it on the cheap, driving 11 hours each way, staying with these people we’ve never met, spacing our meals and choosing carefully from each menu, asking people to teach us for free what they have learned from years of study and experience. We are gladly feasting on the crumbs that fall from the tables of the rich.

But it's more complicated than that. The fact is, the community of faith we are imagining together has mostly been imagined around my dining room table, which we got from IKEA, in a house where there are no "objects of art" unless you count the ones my kids made through their elementary school years, and the dishes on which we serve dinner each week are of a variety that can only be found on the shelves at Goodwill.

But we put a first-world diet on those plates every single week for our new church friends, and drink bottles of beer of seasonal flavors from Kroger's finest selection to lubricate our friendship and shake loose our Bible study from the predictable routes of meaning-making. We pay suburban snob property taxes on our reasonably sized house with just a regular double garage.

And my spouse and I are aware that the twenty-somethings who come into our home feel that they are entering a world of wealth to which they aspire but which feels far off to them, depressingly unattainable at this point in their lives when they are still borrowing money from Sallie Mae to complete the vocational trajectories that look less like yellow brick roads than uncharted trails leading to the 16.8% unemployment rate that persists among adults under 30, against which student loans have to be paid back regardless.

"There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. 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."

But it's more complicated than that. These twenty-somethings I'm traveling with, both on this literal Nashville pilgrimage and the larger, less literal journey toward some new expression of Christian community that we hope will satiate the spiritual hungers of a new generation, are not exactly covered with sores, but I'm aware that the life I have is the one they wish for, where the only need for a credit card is to buy stuff online, not to pay this month's utilities in advance of the next pitiful paycheck that may or may not be enough to cover August's air conditioning; where the final student loans were paid off last Christmas, well in advance of our first child entering college; where the pair of cars in that double garage never inspire a whispered prayer for one more day of transmission health before leaving the house in the morning.

The Millennials in my living room are part of a generation that, the Pew Research Center says, worry more about money than any living generation did at their age, who know and compare their credit scores at an age when I didn't even know anybody was keeping score, who report at a rate of 52% that they regularly spend sleepless nights worrying about money or the lack thereof. It's the first American generation, so the economists tell us, that will not do better than their parents did, that will not exceed the economic achievements of their forebears, and whose adult anxiety mounts in proportion to their disappointment with adulthood.

"There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. 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."

But it's more complicated than that. The leadership team for Galileo Church came to my IKEA dining room table a couple of weeks ago for a day-long planning retreat. The night before, I texted each of their smartphones an offer to pull out my Mr. Coffee to supply their morning caffeine, and heard nothing back, so Mr. Coffee stayed in the cabinet. And in the morning, four of the five of them

showed up with tall, smooth cups of steamy, foamy, creamy Starbucks, each with a special shot of this and a dollop of that, their consolation for having gotten up early and made the journey to my house in those cars for which they offer daily intercession. Mr. Coffee was not needed; the favors obtained from the Starbucks siren ringed the table alongside the smartphones that held each one of them aloft in webs of connection I cannot quite comprehend.

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. 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.”

About a year ago Ryan Bird, the founder of a well-known next church community in Little Rock, announced that the four-year-old congregation was closing its doors, despite the requisite one-word moniker that one has to be cooler than most people to understand; it was called Eikon, with an E-I and a K; and scores of connections with hipster musicians who graced their worship stage; and the edgy website that made you feel like you just had to meet these people, followed immediately by crippling worry about what you would wear when you finally got the chance; and the way-cooler-than-you, or least way-cooler-than me, pastor persona; and all the buzz you could ever hope for around such a project. Everybody thinking about new church knew Eikon. And then it was gone, poof. And for a long time, Ryan Byrd wasn’t talking about why.

Last week, a full year after their last worship service together, he broke his silence in a series of [blog](#) posts called “Confessions of a Failed Church Planter.” He said he was finally ready to tell us what happened, how it came apart, and what it felt like to watch his life project crumple in on itself.

The posts were numbered as reasons, and Reason #1 probably won’t surprise you: Money. There just wasn’t enough of it. Church is expensive. Even without a building to maintain, even when you are assembling your worship set each week with plywood and spray paint and duct tape and bailing wire, even when you are asking your pastoral staff to pick up shifts at—you guessed it—Starbucks to pay their own student loans and get some health care out of the deal, it takes cash to keep the whole thing going.

The only surprising thing about that is that Ryan Byrd is saying it out loud, or at least virtually out loud, when most next-church folks are reluctant to talk about money, what with all the Millennial Lazaruses among us, the unchurched and de-churched student-loan-paying, old-car-driving, crappy-apartment-dwelling, 16.8%-unemployment-facing, credit-score-worrying twenty-somethings who can’t sleep at night because they’re already worried about money without their church nosing around for a tithe just to make the rent on the bar where they’re meeting and keep the liability insurance paid up. I’ve visited a dozen varieties of next church in the last three months and believe me, the community conversation about money is pained at best, absent at worst, and no church planter I know is feeling confident about paying next month’s bills.

Our own denomination celebrates a particular new church effort led by innovative pastors with passion and drive and plenty of cool, but when I visited them a year ago they confessed that they hadn’t drawn a salary or even a stipend in eight months, and her mother was paying their mortgage to keep them from losing their house. But no, they weren’t asking their church for money, not directly, not explicitly. It would drive away, they felt, the very people they were most hoping to reach, and they didn’t want to complicate relationships in their new church with financial pressures or obligations.

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. 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.”

I’m sitting in this splendid room surrounded by these *objects* enjoying a top-shelf bourbon buzz and wishing I could say to Jesus, “That’s a great story, man, but it’s more complicated than that.”

Doesn’t he know that?

Doesn’t he know that the dividing lines are not that bright; that the field of economics is half-science, half-voodoo; that “Blessed are the poor” and “Woe to you who are rich” just confuses us because we are broke and exhausted, but hold on just a minute because my phone is buzzing to tell me that the new iOS has finally downloaded (hashtag first-world-problems!) and the church I’m inventing from scratch using all the leftover ideas from all the Eikons that have fallen before me is on a clock, a money clock, that ticks away by the gallon as we trek to Nashville to see whether more candles and a better guitarist will get us any nearer to the throne of God, keeping our eyes peeled for Starbucks near the interstate so we can refuel and keep going.

Complicated, Jesus, see?

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. 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.”

You know, they think that maybe that passage from 1 Timothy 6 is cribbed from an ancient service of admission to the ordained ministry [Craddock, Hayes, Holladay, & Tucker, *Preaching Through the Christian Year, Year C*, Trinity Press, 1994, p. 422].

When you look at it more closely later, which you will because you’ll be curious to see if what I’m saying rings true, you’ll see that it starts out with instructions about being content with not being financially well-off, indeed being grateful that wealth is not in your future because it’s dangerous to be rich, seductive and sexy and altogether to be shunned as you pursue a higher calling to the godly vocation of faithful service to God and God’s church. That should probably be in every service of ordination, an acknowledgement that our choices preclude the eventuality of multi-car garages as big as a house and the regular enjoyment of top-shelf bourbon with our guests. “We have learned to be content if we have food and clothing,” the mentor says to the mentee, and by implication, “so should you.”

But later in the same passage, the ordinand is reminded that they will be stewards of the conversation among the faithful about money, about wealth and poverty, about the power of money to produce tangible good works and generous sharing, about the prioritization of spiritual treasure over material comfort. “As for those who in this present age are rich,” the mentor says, “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 works, share generously, etc., 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.”

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. 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.”

It’s complicated, yes, and the complications mean that the minister must be especially ready to help the congregation sort out the complexity. In next-church, in traditional church, we must sit at the feet of Jesus long enough to imagine ourselves both as poor Lazarus and as the finely clothed and well fed rich one, to hold in tension the paradox of our overworked exhaustion and financial anxiety alongside our designer coffee and cell phone lifelines. We must, because Jesus said that it matters, our relative wealth and lack thereof; it matters ultimately; and therefore to ignore it, to squeeze it into a timid series of half-hearted stewardship sermons during church budget season, to think we’re doing our churches a favor by not opening the conversation, by letting them believe they are on their own to work out the complexity of what it means to have or not have, to earn or not earn, to give or not give, all on their own because we are not equipped or willing to enter that complexity with them...Well, that is an abdication of pastoral responsibility. They need more than that from us. Jesus asks for more than that from us.

Practically speaking, there are three things I wish someone had told me about money when I was in divinity school.

First, get your financial *self* together right now, starting today; don’t pretend like it’ll be okay to sort it out later when you have a real job. Borrow less, work more, live as frugally as you can to avoid as much debt as possible. Make a budget and live within it, and rewrite it every semester without fail, with much prayer for the contentment God promises when we have food and clothing, enough to live on, bread for today. Start now to live in the orderly way you want to help people live later, when you are serving churches composed of people of every generation who are sorting out the complicated problems that are the constant companions of money in our world, just like they were in the world of Jesus’ first followers. Converse honestly with Jesus about how hard this is. That dialogue goes better than you think.

Second, give — as generously and consistently as you can, starting right now, so that by the time you get a real job, you’ll have an established habit of generosity that will speak more loudly than any sermon you’ll ever preach about how God intends for us to think about our resources. Don’t let anybody tell you that ministers don’t tithe, that somehow your underpaid service to the church is the only gift you need to give. You won’t make much, but you will always make more than some of the people you serve, and all of the people you serve will know that you practice what you preach, a commitment to live on less than you make for the sake of God’s work in the world and the church you love.

Finally, begin now to practice transparency around the subject of money. Don’t let the complexity of it scare you away from raising questions that you might not be able to answer; don’t imagine that polite silence is the kindest mode you can offer God’s people. Remember how much Jesus talked about money, how entangled his kingdom preaching was with money-talk, not only as a metaphor for faithful stewardship of God’s gifts but also as concrete as God’s desire that we learn to care for those without clothing and food, tangible needs that can only be met with money.

Remember the prominent role money played in the early Christian communities, for good and for ill. Remember how dangerous it is, how necessary it will be to confront its power for the ongoing

health of the Christian communities you will serve. Don't be afraid to say its name—like Voldemort, it can only be confronted by those who are brave enough to form the syllables with our mouths.

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. 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.”

May the God who made them both, the rich and the poor, and everyone who lives in the complexity of in between, the God who blesses us with food and clothing, all that we need for contentment and enjoyment, also grant us courage for the lifelong conversation about money and meaning.

Amen.

Rev. Dr. Katie Hays (she/her) went to M.I.T. before she moved on from engineering (which she really liked, but was really terrible at) to theology. She was educated for traditional church ministry at Yale Divinity School (M. Div.) and Princeton Theological Seminary (D. Min.). She did traditional church ministry for almost 20 years. Galileo Church, where Katie serves as Lead Evangelist, is her attempt to do something completely different because she had an epiphany while sprawled on the floor of a Spring Creek BBQ. You can ask her about that when you meet her in person.