

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania, VA
To be delivered on September 25, 2016	On the occasion of the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 21C

Luke 16:19-31

### God's Economy

We were flipping through the channels the other day and stumbled on a reality show where these two guys were at an auto auction. It was one of those really high-end auto auctions. They were planning on bidding on a particular car, a vintage Porsche 911 race car. Now get this: their limit that they discussed before the bidding began was \$1.35 million. That's how far they were willing to bid, and no further... It's good to have limits, huh? Well, the car was brought out on stage and the two men exchanged a final few excited words of encouragement to each other reinforcing that they would not bid any more than the \$1.35 million. Then the bidding began.

1 million? No bid. 1 million? Still no bid. The auctioneer went down to \$900,000. He got a bid. \$950,000? Yes, he got that bid. A million? Yes. The bidding went on moving by either \$50,000 or \$100,000 at a time. Pretty quickly the price went past the \$1.35 million that the guys were willing to bid. They just sat back at that point and watched. Things started to happen really fast. Bidding went back and forth in rapid succession with the associated excitement, mixed with a little disbelief, until the auctioneer was saying, "\$2 million?" At this point, the one man looked at his friend and said, "Should I bid?" "No!" was his quick reply. The car ended up selling for \$2.1 million. Obviously the two guys that the show was following were a little shocked. I suppose they didn't expect it to go for that much money. About this time we flipped to another channel.

It's fair to say that I was more than a little shocked that I just witnessed a car being purchased for over 2 million dollars. A car! The way my mind works, I started thinking about

all that I could do with \$2.1 million. What kind of church programs could I fund? Outreach programs, educational program, youth programs. We could re-open the Laundromat that used to be next door, so people could have an affordable, convenient place to do their laundry, and we could even make it kind of a community center where people could gather together, and offer children's programs while people's unmentionables dried. We could open an English pub, that could host not only entertainment, but community events—presentations, debates, or panel discussions on current topics. We could build affordable elder housing. We could open our own radio station.

Then I got to thinking, how much money does someone have if he is willing to spend that much on a car? Even if I had the money to spend like that, I can't imagine feeling good about spending it that way. I mean, I love cars. But if I spent over \$2 million on a car, I would have to contribute an equal amount to the public transportation system in my community, or something like that.

Maybe I'm not meant to have that kind of money. Not that I have anything against rich people. Neither does the Bible have anything against the wealthy particularly, though sometimes it seems that way. As Paul points out, it is not money that is the root of all kinds of evil, but "it is the love of money (that) is the root of all kinds of evil." (I Timothy 6:10) Wealth, in a sense, is neutral, neither good nor bad, but it is how one uses one's wealth, and what kind of relationship one has with one's wealth that are important. You cannot serve two masters. "You cannot serve God and wealth." (Luke 16:13)

The rich man feasted sumptuously every day while Lazarus, the poor man, longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table. That was clearly an unacceptable situation. Just like, if I was driving around in a car that I paid \$2.1 million dollars for (and I have

no idea if anyone would just drive around in a car worth that much, like, ‘honey, I’m gonna go pick up some milk’) while my neighbors were walking everywhere because they couldn’t afford a car, that would be unacceptable to me. As I said, the wealthy are not necessarily always the bad guy in Jesus’ stories, but they clearly have an obligation to do what’s right with their wealth.

There was a time when wealth and privilege were seen as granted by God to the worthy who rightfully passed it on through their families. There was this concept of *noblesse oblige*—the obligation of the nobility. If you were a fan of Downton Abbey, you saw the end of this era, as the family who owned the estate felt they had a paternalistic responsibility to provide for and to care for their tenants. Not that they had an obligation to allow them access to wealth and privilege themselves, however. Consider the so called robber barons who built this country on the backs of the poor. They did amazing things with their wealth through philanthropy, established terrific institutions and foundations that continue to do good today. We live in a kind of new age of philanthropy by the super rich. People like Bill Gates and Warren Buffet are transforming charitable giving by applying their business acumen to invest their copious money strategically to solve the world’s biggest problems. The Gates foundation is putting serious money into an effort to [reinvent the toilet](#). Sounds funny, but 2.5 billion people worldwide don’t have access to safe, affordable sanitation. Many of the worst, and most common, diseases in the world are preventable with good sanitation. Just last week Mark Zuckerberg, the face behind Facebook, and his wife [announced](#) that they will give \$3 billion to an effort to cure, prevent, or manage all diseases by the end of this century. Ambitious, huh?

So what’s the point? Do wealthy people need to give away all of their wealth? I don’t know. If they did, I suppose they would just be poor people then. But it does seem that there is an obligation that comes with wealth. And there are plenty of pitfalls that come with wealth too.

“Those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction.” (I Timothy 6:9) We're in trouble if we let wealth be our master.

It seems that one person feasting sumptuously while another starves is unacceptable in God's kingdom. How do we solve that problem? That's a tough one. Do we let the free market decide our fate? Do we institute more government programs to redistribute wealth? Do we blame it all on the wealthy one-percenters? When we look at it globally, we Americans are the one-percenters. Do we raise the minimum wage? Do we depend on the charity of individuals? Tough questions. Debatable.

I'm not an economist. But I do know something about the economy in God's kingdom. In that kingdom every person has equal value, and that value is, in God's eyes, infinite. When we look at the need and the suffering of another human being and we see that as our problem, then we are taking our first steps into the kingdom of God. The rich man didn't need to give away his wealth, he just needed to love Lazarus, the poor man at his gate. In loving him it would have been intolerable for him to see Lazarus starving and having his sores licked by the dogs. If he could have applied lessons we have learned in our society, through our history, he would have done more than just nobly give the poor beggar the scraps from his own table. He would have empowered him to make his own living. He would have removed the social and economic obstacles that prevented Lazarus from having access to the common wealth. He would have corrected the injustices and prejudices that kept Lazarus relegated to being a second class citizen. He would have worked to restructure the society, the economy, and the political system of his day so that each person was granted the worth that God sees in him or her.

Of course the good news in all of this is that no matter how much we get things wrong God will work it out in the end. The question for us is simply: Do we want to be wealthy or do we want to be poor... in God's kingdom?

Amen.