

**INVITATION TO TRANSFORMATION**  
**LUKE 16:19-31**  
**SEPTEMBER 26, 2004 – STEWARDSHIP LAUNCH SUNDAY**  
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We might sum up the invitation of the Bible to transformation in the words of the woman at the well, “come and see a man who has told me everything I have ever done.”

Come and see. Anyone who has eyes to see, let them see, says Jesus. One of my clergy friends told me last week about the Polish man who was at the eye doctor having his eyes examined. He was reading one of those eye charts tacked up on the wall. The one that starts with one very large letter at the top. Usually an “E” and as you move to the bottom line the letters get very small.

The doctor was pointing to the bottom line. The man stared dumbly then a look of recognition splashed across his face. “Hey, I know that guy!”<sup>i</sup>

Today’s parable, all of the parables of Jesus, help us to see better. In fact, these parables of Jesus are like spiritual eye drops that lead to clear vision. To transformed living. I want to continue today the conversation we’re having this fall about giving and faith.

In a word, today’s parable helps us see there are two kinds of people in the world. The kind who say to God, “thy will be done.” And the other kind to whom God says, as Father Abraham does to the rich man in today’s story, “thy will be done.”<sup>ii</sup>

The invitation to transformation is about seeing clearly. Seeing ourselves and our neighbor differently. Seeing how to give better than we knew. Seeing how to read the Bible more deeply.

Lord knows we don’t always want to see the world the way it is. I remember William Sloane Coffin describing taking the train from New Haven into New York City.

After traveling through the plush countryside of the Connecticut gold coast and Westchester County the train starts making its way into Harlem. Burned out buildings, abandoned cars, graffiti everywhere.

Just when you start feeling disturbed about what you are seeing, says Coffin, the train rushes into a tunnel – thank God.

We don’t always want to see the world the way it is. Part of the motive behind Luke’s parable today is to help the Pharisees see their world a little differently. Help them read Scripture a little more honestly, closely, openly.

The problem is those Jesus was talking to loved money. The rich man in the story was Jesus’ way of holding up a mirror to his audience. Clarence Jordan, founder of the Koinonia Farm called such people money-acs. People addicted to money.

The Pharisees developed a theory that if you were wealthy it was a sign of God blessing your life. And if you were poor it was a sign of God cursing your life. This misinterpretation, or *misperception* we might call it, of the Psalms finds its way into every generation. In fact, it became what some called the Protestant work ethic – a popular way of justifying wealth and avoiding the responsibility for poverty here in the United States.

We don't always want to see the world the way it is and one of the messages of the story today is that wealth can distort our vision.

I think that those Congress men and women who last Thursday passed legislation that President Bush is expected to sign soon, I think those legislators suffer from wealth-distorted vision.

They passed into law, if the President signs it, a huge multi-billion dollar/multi-year tax break for the middle class and for businesses but excluded from the bill any relief for poor people. The omission is already being condemned by activists and legislators of conscience.

Wealth can distort our vision. When we took our son to college in New Orleans we had a few days to explore the city. I did not realize that Tennessee Williams lived there for a time. We saw the second story apartment from which he could see the streetcar named "Desire" and in which he wrote that famous play.

I picked up a couple of Tennessee Williams' plays. In the version of *The Glass Menagerie* I have there is a lovely confessional piece by Williams at the introduction to the book entitled, "The Catastrophe of Success."

Williams talks about how his first play *Glass Menagerie* catapulted him to fame and fortune. He went from struggling artist to artist living in opulent surroundings – a suite in a fancy hotel in New York, fine clothes, eating out at the best restaurants.

Were it not for the tragedy of it Williams' account would be comic. I sat down, he says, and looked about me and was very depressed. I thought to myself, this is just a period of adjustment. Tomorrow morning I will wake up in this first-class hotel suite above the discreet hum of an East Side boulevard and I will appreciate its elegance and luxuriate in its comforts. Tomorrow morning when I look at the green satin sofa I will fall in love with it. It is only temporarily that the green satin looks like slime on stagnant water.

But in the morning the inoffensive little sofa looked more revolting to me than the night before. I was getting too fat for the high priced suits an acquaintance selected for me. I lived on room service. But in this too there was disenchantment. Sometime between when I ordered dinner over the phone and when it was rolled into my living room like a corpse on a rubber-wheeled table, I lost all interest.

Then Williams gets to the core of his ennui. But all this was the trivial aspect of a spiritual dislocation that began to manifest itself in far more disturbing ways. I soon found myself becoming indifferent to people. A well of cynicism rose in me. Conversations all sounded as if they had been recorded years ago and were being played back on a turntable. Sincerity and kindness seemed to have gone out of my friends' voices. I suspected them of hypocrisy. I stopped calling them, stopped seeing them. ...I was walking around dead in my shoes and I knew it but there were no friends I knew or trusted to take them aside and tell them what was the matter.<sup>iii</sup>

Though Williams' experience took place in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century it could well describe the experience of anyone suffering from wealth-distorted vision today. What happens is a general loss of interest in life and ultimately in people. A spiritual dislocation he calls it.

It is precisely this spiritual dislocation that the rich man in Jesus' parable suffers from. He is surrounded by opulence and comfort but he does not see the suffering of Lazarus at this door. He is blinded by his comfort. His vision is distorted by his wealth. He experiences what Tennessee Williams calls the "catastrophe of success."

So when the rich man appeals to Father Abraham to send a messenger to his brothers to warn them against a fate similar to his, Abraham refuses saying, "if they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

But Jesus' story isn't so much about the afterlife. This story, as well as our "Invitation to Transformation" stewardship campaign is about this life, what we do or don't do with our wealth and the eternal consequences this has for us. Followers of Jesus are forbidden to indulge like the rich man behind closed doors. Followers of Jesus participate in the redistribution of wealth with all the human family. What Reed talked about a minute ago and what I am talking about now is primarily about the condition of our souls and secondarily about our church budget.

Would tossing a nugget of gold out his window now and then have saved the rich man? What if he had made a little "to go" plate for this pitiful beggar? Would God have said, "well done good and faithful servant?" Of course not. Theologian Jergen Motlmann is right, "The opposite of poverty is not property. The opposite of both is community."<sup>iv</sup>

Clarence Jordan said, "what the poor need is not charity but capital, not caseworkers but coworkers. And what the rich need is a wise, honorable, and just way of divesting themselves of their overabundance."<sup>v</sup>

Community-building, life-transforming giving. Mother Teresa understood this in her work in Calcutta. She framed her whole life around the notion that we see Christ "in the distressing disguise of the poor." Her Sisters of Charity believe they touch the body of Christ when they help the poor. They pray while working, believing they are doing it for Jesus and doing it to Jesus.

Almost as if on cue for this year's stewardship campaign our National and World Mission Committee had the opportunity last week to host a man who lives in Rochester but is from the Sudan. He is a young man. Salva Dut is his name. He was one of the lost boys of the Sudan – marching hundreds of miles at the age of twelve to neighboring Kenya to avoid the massacre going on in his own country.

Salva Dut returned to the Sudan recently and found his father whom he had not seen in sixteen years. His father is dying from disease contracted by drinking non-potable water – the only water available now in western Sudan. So Salva with his degree in international business from Brockton State has formed a non-profit corporation to drill for water in the Sudan. His business plan is sound. Several large churches in Rochester support it. He came to Westminster last week to see if we could help. We told him we were inspired by his vision and would do our best to find a way.

The invitation to transformation today and through this fall has to do with how we see ourselves, our neighbor and the world not just within but beyond the city of Buffalo.

Transformed vision begins with seeing abundance where we see now only scarcity. Not just focusing on our city, region and nation's economic lull but focusing on our blessings, our abundance, and giving thanks for and sharing them.

When our church pledge cards arrive in the mail this week you and I will have an opportunity to create some community. To redistribute a little wealth. To transform our lives through the mission of Westminster.

In fact we don't really need to wait for a Salva Dut to come knocking on our door. Jesus knocks on our door every day in the form of some poor Lazarus or Salva Dut or child from the West Side of Buffalo who comes here for food and tutoring.

Jesus had a way of talking frankly about what it means to be a transformed person. I can imagine him saying something like this to us today:

If you want to keep your life, to keep it safe and secure, never risk it, never spend it, never give it away if you can possibly avoid it, keep it locked up all to yourself, in your safe-deposit box so to speak, you can. You can do that; but if you do, eventually your life will shrivel up and disappear like a bit of dust.

But if you are willing to let go, to lose it, so to speak; if you are willing to put it into the soil of existence, bury it, invest it, involve it in the great issues of life, spend it, give it extravagantly, you may lose it altogether in one sense; but the miracle is that you will find another life, another kind of life, a life as different as the acorn is from the oak tree, fuller, richer more beautiful, more creative; what the Gospel writers called eternal life.<sup>vi</sup>

That's what George Herbert is talking about in the poem on the cover of your bulletin this morning: "Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life." Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Charlie Bang, pastor of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church told me this joke. He probably got it from his colleague the Rev. John Burke.

<sup>ii</sup> A phrase taken from William Willimon, Pulpit Resource, Vol 32, year c, July to September, 56.

<sup>iii</sup> Tennessee Williams, The Glass Menagerie (New York: New Directions Press, 1945) 13.

<sup>iv</sup> Willimon, 56.

<sup>v</sup> Willimon, 56.

<sup>vi</sup> Theodore Parker Ferris, Selected Sermons (Boston: Trinity Church, 1976) 174.