

Cornel Barnett
Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
September 19, 2010

Isaiah 58:6-11; Luke 16:19-31
"The Will of God"

The gospel story today is a tough one. Its basic message is clear: If you have more than enough then share with those who do not have. It's a message to the rich. I have enough and am kind of like the rich man in the story – although I am not rich, rich monetarily.

A man came to the office this week on his bicycle and asked for money. I said we don't hand out money but he could have some food from the food bank barrel. He happily took some cans of food. Should I have given him money? It so happened that I had nothing in my wallet that day. I am ambivalent about giving money to panhandlers. Sometimes I do, sometimes I don't.

About a year ago, I chose not to give to a woman who asked me for a hand-out at a gas station. I noticed she had a male companion who was hidden at the side of the station. I asked her why her male friend hadn't asked me for something and suggested that he might be using her. She told me that I did not know her story and walked away. I regretted not engaging her in a more caring and compassionate and less direct way.

Jesus indicts the rich man in the text today – to the extent that after he dies he goes to a place of torment and fire. The poor man in the story who the rich man ignores goes to paradise. There's enough in the story to make us uncomfortable. The message that comes to us again and again is to be cognizant of those less fortunate than us.

The story could be a stewardship message: To be good stewards of what God has entrusted to us.

It could be a pre-election message: To vote for candidates and bills that support the poor as the Bible encourages.

It could be a call to support financially and bodily homeless shelters and feeding programs like the St Vincent's Dining Room on B Street in San Rafael. We do well by contributing freshly-cooked food to Mill Street each month and non-perishable food for the Food Bank. We give to excellent global programs through the denominational special offerings. We do our part and some.

Today's biblical text is a story about how we "see" the poor. Columbia Theological Seminary professor, Charles Cousar, points out that in those biblical days the rich don't "see" the poor. He writes: One of the prime dangers of wealth is that it causes blindness.

The parable powerfully calls into question how we handle our money today and raises the question of whether we “see” the poor at our gates. ¹

The passage is certainly a call to greater faithfulness.

The text before us today speaks of an eternal heaven and an eternal hell – a chasm that cannot be crossed from either side. Theologically, I do not agree with this. I don’t believe that a God of love would damn people to hell eternally. There are consequences to our behavior and consequences come in this life and the next but we have opportunities in this life and the next to respond to and follow the good news of salvation or wholeness in Jesus Christ. There is biblical support for post-death salvation in 1 Peter chapter 3. Peter calls hell a prison and he writes that Jesus visits the prisons of the afterlife. We can discuss this after the worship service.

I have titled this sermon “The Will of God” because I feel at bottom the text is about the will of God. Earlier in Matthew Jesus taught his disciples “the Lord’s Prayer.” One line is: “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” In this passage he helps us understand what the will of God is.

One hears in seminaries and churches that we need to constantly search for God’s will. Jesus makes it fairly clear in this passage.

The rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus to his brothers to warn them of the torment. The text then reads: “Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

The will of God is the message of Moses characterized as the law and the message of the prophets. The law or Torah which is found in the first five books of the Bible takes an enormous amount of interpretation – so with regards to the law we need interpretation to get it right. But it’s there for us to interpret and understand. The prophets are clearer.

Isaiah describes God’s will: “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter — when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?” (Isaiah 58:6-7)

Micah describes God’s will: “God has told you, O mortal what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8)

¹ *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors, Louisville, Kentucky: 2010 Westminster John Knox Press, 119-120

Isaiah and Micah both say: "...they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." (Isaiah 2:4 and Micah 4:3)

Jesus as prophet said: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed." (Luke 4:18)

There is enough in the teachings of Moses and the prophets (and now Jesus' words) to give us a pretty clear sense of the will of God. It's about reversing poverty, hunger and violence and being about compassion, peace and justice. Its unpacking love and living love in a needy world.

I'm not sure why Jesus uses the scare tactic of heaven and hell. He was addressing the Pharisees who he said were lovers of money – perhaps at the expense of the poor – and he uses language they can understand. How do we speak the same language with different stories today?

One of the ways is to look at the ways rich people give. Yesterday's Chronicle ran a story about Facebook founder, Mark Zuckerberg, giving \$100-million to schools in Newark, New Jersey. It's amazing that this 26-year-old owns that much money and that he is giving piles of it away – for education!

Theresa Lloyd in *Why Rich People Give: Philanthropy in the UK* cites religion as the primary motivator in giving. Others attributed their giving to cultural influences. Everything Lloyd writes has resonance in the US.

Along with religion, many features of family background and upbringing were cited as influences.

For those who had inherited wealth, there had often been a history of family giving to their local community.

A sense of community involvement was also expressed by some self-made entrepreneurs with strong local links. It's interesting that Zuckerberg has no connection to Newark other than knowing the charismatic Newark Mayor, Cory Booker, who has plans to reverse the poor education and low test scores in Newark schools. Zuckerberg said he chose to make his philanthropic debut in education "because every child deserves a good education and right now that's not happening." I'd like to see this supplemented by more public funds. That's another story.

Parents are another influence in giving. They are cited in helping their off-spring to be more responsible for disadvantaged people within wider society.

Immigrant families talked about wanting to contribute to the society which had given refuge to their family.

Comparing UK giving to US giving Lloyd writes that there are fundamental differences between the two tax regimes. In the US a donor may allocate capital to be given to a charity at some future date, continue to enjoy the income from the capital and get tax relief at the time of the commitment. Such "planned giving" accounts for a significant proportion of major gifts received, particularly for endowments for institutions.

US tax relief is available on gifts in kind, including works of art, and this has a major impact on the level of charitable giving.

Schools in the US foster giving through community service. Volunteerism and service on boards are other ways people give, particularly in the US. People give in and through their churches.

Almost everyone in the US and the UK is rich. In relation to philanthropy and our relationship to and with the poor we don't want to be paternalistic where we have an us/them attitude. If anything the biblical text today humanizes and values all people and especially the poor. "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" has the poor man Lazarus in the bosom of Abraham.

God's will is done when we identify with the poor and do all we can to help them get out of their poverty. Jesus doesn't let us off the hook. I hope his scare story doesn't scare us but challenges us to be more giving, compassionate and caring. Amen.