

First Mennonite Church Edmonton

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I love to collect things. Anyone who knows me well can confirm this. My collections give me great feelings of satisfaction and contentment. I have collected things for as long as I remember, in grade school it was baseball and hockey trading cards, later on I started collecting comic books, then music, then novels and sets of novels, movies, and now I confess my mind is set on collecting board games. This really isn't a healthy habit for me to have.

If I'm not careful, my collections can take over, they can overwhelm, they can distract me. This is why, I have to be very careful about stuff. It can easily take on a mind of its own. It can easily become a force of its own. And here's the thing about me and collections, I collect because there's something in me, a compulsion, a fear, a drive, that wants to not miss out on something, that wants to complete the whole set, there's something inside of me that doesn't want to forget or ignore something. And out of that fear, out of that longing, out of that desire, guess what happens...something is often ignored, something is often missed, something is not noticed. And so it becomes a viscous cycle.

Today's parable has invited me to think about and consider those things that distract me, those things that consume an inordinate amount of my attention, and thus, preoccupy me, or prohibit me from seeing those things that are right in front of me. Our story this morning is a humbling parable for me, because after spending some time with this it I'm forced to admit that there are things that I don't see, largely because I'm so very focused elsewhere.

Our parable for this week arrives shortly after the Parable of the Dishonest Manager, and this is important. The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus and the Parable of the Dishonest Manager are, for me, linked. This is the third in a series of three sayings by Jesus all tied together by Jesus' reminder, or warning, that we cannot serve two masters. At the end of the Parable of the Dishonest Manager, Jesus explicitly states this in a warning. However with our parable, Jesus is a little more coy. It's not explicitly stated, however I think through the caricature of the Rich Man I can see the same lesson, or warning being implied.

The Rich Man in our Parable as they are described, is the epitome of wealth. They wear purple, a colour, as we know is directly tied to royalty, they wear fine linen, they feast sumptuously. One can probably create in their imagination a picture of this Rich Man. Behind their gated property they isolate themselves from reality. This Rich Man is the center of their own universe, and everything revolves around them. However, just on the other side of the gate, rubbing up against their protected world, is Lazarus.

Lazarus, not to be confused with Jesus' beloved friend in John, is the epitome of poverty. It's suggests that because Jesus uses characters which embody such extremes of wealth and poverty, that he is actually using an ancient story telling style. Nonetheless, Lazarus is

presented as the embodiment of poverty. The Rich Man is so consumed with his wealth and lavish lifestyle that he is blind to the needy just outside his door. Literally.

In time, death comes for them both.

And here, the story flips upside down, much like Mary's and Hannah's songs, the powerful are brought down, the lowly are lifted, the hungry have been filled with good things, the Rich are turned away empty. The Rich Man, tortured and tormented, is unable to escape his own sense of privilege or entitlement. He seeks relief, and so asks Lazarus to serve him. He asks Abraham to "send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue." When that request is denied he again ask Abraham to warn the rest of his family by sending Lazarus to visit his brothers?!? In all of these requests, the Rich Man continues to be blind to Lazarus and his humanity. The Rich Man continues to see Lazarus as he has always seen him, less than. His wealth, his privilege, his entitlement, has blinded him to the reality that surrounds. And so the lesson is emphasized again for us, you can't serve two masters.

This story evokes curiosity for me, not on it's own, but how it's connected to the preceding stories. One of the things that Jesus spoke about, more than anything else, was wealth. I won't begin to speculate just why? But it was wealth and the imbalance of it, the seductive nature of it, the power that it has over us, which Jesus repeatedly warned about. In this case, I read this parable as yet another warning about the seduction of wealth.

I hear Jesus warning how it can be so enchanting, so distracting, so heartless a god, as to draw our attention away from the needs right in front of us. I might go so far as to suggest that wealth can very easily become a god that is worshipped. It certainly made Lazarus invisible to the Rich Man. At the very least, wealth, money, mammon, can become a competing master. But I don't think this warning is limited to just wealth.

I wonder, what other masters do we serve? What other masters get in the way of our service to God? Perhaps a more provocative way of saying this is, what do you covet, what do you worship? Or maybe I should ask this differently, what masters do we serve, which blind us, to that which is right in front of us? Like the Rich Man, who coveted and worshipped wealth and status, who worshipped Mammon, rather than God, sometimes we worship different things which draw our attention away from not just God, but from what's right in front of us, Lazarus.

This has led me to think of some of the masters that I serve, in addition to God. It's not just mammon that can compel our attention and worship.

I started this reflection talking about my affinity towards stuff, or as I prefer to call it, my collections. Often I can get caught up in finding that next thing, that I sometimes get distracted. I sometimes become so preoccupied that time just flies by, consumed with tending to, organizing, and relishing my collections that I miss out on opportunities right in front of me. I've learned that my collecting comes from a place of not wanting to miss out, it comes from a fear of not having enough, it comes from a place of fear, of being left behind. And I've realized

that sometimes in I, we, can get caught up in satisfying and protecting ourselves from our fears.

And so the myth I tell myself is that to have more, to know more, to gather and collect more, means that I am missing less, it means I have a sense of control, it means I won't be surprised or have the rug pulled out from underneath me. And when this fear becomes too powerful, when this fear grows beyond its boundaries, this fear gets in the way of seeing opportunities, it gets in the way of seeing possibilities, it plain old gets in the way, and then fear begins to become the master that I serve, instead of God.

Maybe, like me, that's your story. Or maybe it's something else. Maybe the other master that's served is safety and security? On the one hand they are good and right. But when taken to extremes they can become paranoia, or at worst they can paralyze us, when the world appears to be full of dangers, sometimes the safest place is in the space that we can control. Or maybe it's research and analysis, sometimes it's good, it can lead us to the wise decision. And again, it can also paralyze us into inaction, becoming overwhelmed by all the possibilities. Or perhaps it's a desire to do the best we can, a noble pursuit. However, when taken to extremes, it can lead us to only see what's wrong, and miss out on the good things that are happening around us.

Jesus tells this parable not as words of condemnation, not as a portent for things to come, but as an invitation for us to reflect and re-evaluate how and where our attention is being drawn. There are many things that can distract us from the injustice of the world around us. There are many things that compete for our allegiance and our worship. Jesus in this parable reminds us, where our attention is to be re-oriented, towards the values of God's Kingdom. Thankfully, Jesus leaves the parable open ended. It continues to be an invitation for us to reflect on, and re-orient ourselves. It's another opportunity for us to put in their place those things that distract, and set our gaze again, to the worship of God.

Amen