

**“What Goes Around, Comes Around”**  
**Luke 16:19-31**  
**United Methodist Church of Yucaipa**  
**Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching**

**Scripture. Prayer.**

**Opening.**

I love the classic Road Runner cartoons. They’re the greatest animated slap-stick comedy around. Other than Bugs Bunny, maybe.

There’s a set pattern of anticipation and fulfillment of expectations with the Road Runner. All this nice little bird wants to do is run as fast as he can all over the desert. All the mean nasty coyote wants to do is eat the Road Runner.

But the Road Runner is too fast for him. So he is constantly sending away to the ACME Company for some kit or other. They have motorized umbrellas to carry him through the air so he can sneak up on the Road Runner from above. They have jet-powered backpacks so he can gain enough speed to catch up with the Road Runner on foot. They have metallic bird seed so the hungry Road Runner can be sucked into the coyote’s den with a giant magnet.

The problem, of course, is that the coyote always gets caught by his own traps. The motorized umbrella carries him out over a canyon and then runs out of gas. As he plummets to the ground, he watches in horror as the umbrella catches on a boulder, which breaks loose and squishes him flat thousands of feet below.

The jet-powered backpack slams him into a rock wall, which causes a huge boulder to give way and – again – squish him flat as he slides to the ground.

The giant magnet is so powerful that soon pots and pans and trucks and freight trains are being pulled into the coyote’s den, squishing him flat yet another time. It’s silly and mindless and, yes, violent. And yet my sides always end up hurting from laughter when I watch a Road

Runner cartoon. The poor coyote, supposedly the bad guy, gets knocked in the teeth over and over and over again. And the funniest part is that it's due to his own actions. It's instant karma.

### **I. "Karma," the Eastern Version**

The concept of "karma," as you may know, comes from Eastern religions. It assumes a belief in reincarnation. What someone does in this life has an effect on what happens to one in the next life. For example, if one commits murder in this life, one might come back as a worm or a slug in the next life.

Instant karma is sort of a westernization of the idea of karma. It's quickie karma, McDonald's style karma, karma for people in a hurry. Instant karma is another way of saying, "What goes around, comes around." Except that with instant karma, it comes around quickly. As a matter of fact, it comes around immediately. The coyote sets a trap for the Road Runner and immediately gets caught in it himself. Instant karma. What goes around, comes around.

Today's scripture reading is sort of a story about instant karma. It's not about reincarnation because Jews and Christians do not believe in reincarnation. One shot is all we've got at life on earth.

And it's not exactly instant. Nothing happens during the lifetimes of the rich man and Lazarus in terms of rewards and punishments.

But for each of them it's a case of "what goes around, comes around." Lazarus lives in poverty his whole life. He is so hungry that he dreams of eating the scraps from the rich man's table. Unable to imagine actually dining with the rich man, Lazarus fantasizes about eating the garbage the rich man throws on the floor.

It reminds me of a trip Roy took to Nicaragua many years ago. He was with a group of Americans on a peace tour. They were being honored with what – to the locals in the village –

was a very fancy meal. It included chicken that was mostly bones, and salad that the Americans had been warned not to eat, due to water-borne illnesses.

An ancient-looking little woman, with wrinkles on her wrinkles and a twinkle in her eyes, sits next to Roy at the table. Towards the end of the meal, as Roy puts his fork down and converses with others, she taps him on the shoulder and points at the discarded chicken bones on his plate. He is confused, but he nods as she continues to point insistently.

Faster than lightning, she had grabs a bone off his plate. As Roy describes it, she sucks and sucks on that bone until it is dry of any meat or fat whatsoever, and then she literally sucks the marrow out of it. Afterwards, she smiles at Roy in a glowing, satisfied way. This woman is poor enough, and hungry enough, that she is happy with the left-over bones from Roy's meal.

Similarly, Lazarus longs to pick crusts and crumbs out of the dust at the rich man's feet. Soon Lazarus dies from a combination of his illness and his hunger. God blesses him and sends angels to carry him to heaven.

## **II. I'd Rather be Rich**

James Merritt tells this story about a Sunday School teacher that told his class about the story of the rich man and Lazarus. He highlighted the good end of Lazarus and the bad end of the rich man. He pointed out how one man went to hell and the other man went to heaven. He also pointed out how rich one man was and how poor the other man was. After the teacher taught his lesson he said to the class, "Now which would you rather be, children, the rich man or Lazarus?" One boy raised his hand and said, "Well, I'd like to be the rich man while I'm alive, and Lazarus when I'm dead."

The rich man – who is not given a name in Jesus' story – spends his entire life in luxury. He is, apparently, unaware of Lazarus' plight. He has beautiful clothes, and more gourmet food

than he can possibly eat. But he, too, dies. Death, the great equalizer, comes to the rich man and the poor man alike.

In the afterlife what goes around, comes around. Rich in life, ignorant of the poor, the rich man now suffers in the afterlife. Humble and long-suffering in life, well-aware of the riches all around him, Lazarus is now rich in the afterlife. Instant karma. You get what you deserve.

At this point it is important to remember the context of Jesus' story. Luke says that Jesus tells this parable to "the Pharisees, who were lovers of money." From this context we are to understand that the story is not about heaven and hell and how to end up in the more preferred location. The story is about the rich and the poor. It's about economics. It's about the unequal distribution of wealth which allows some to starve while others feast and make merry.

In the past, America was supposedly saved from such worries. Ralph Whitehead, Jr., wrote an article in the '90's, published in the Utne Reader. It still rings surprisingly true for our current situation. In the article, he describes the economic landscape of the United States. I hope you'll forgive me for spending some time on his analysis.

He states that the old economic ladder was fairly simple. There were three classes: a small group of The Rich at the top, The Expanding Middle Class, consisting of both white and blue collar workers, and a large but dwindling group of The Poor at the bottom.

The current situation is much different, says Whitehead. (And by "current" he means the '90's, but it's amazing how much his ideas foreshadow our present economic crisis, in 2010). The two strongest forces in the economic ladder, says Whitehead, are now Upscale America at the top and Downscale America at the bottom. The Middle Class is smaller and more fragile, caught in the middle of the power struggle.

Whitehead's middle class is divided into three sub-groups. The "bright collars" are well-educated, lawyer/engineer/teacher types. The "new collars" are mid-level workers with some technical training but not much clout in the workplace. The traditional "blue collar" group is diminishing in numbers and increasingly living near the economic margins.

Whitehead divides the Downscale Americans into two groups. The "traditional poor" are those who have part-time service occupations with no benefits. Whitehead also identifies a new and growing group which he calls "the underclass." These are the two-million-plus Americans who are permanently homeless and hopeless. They are also – for the most part – voiceless and faceless in our culture.

Finally, the Upscale Americans are divided into two groups – the Very Rich, and the Overclass. The Overclass is just one rung below the Very Rich and is made up of CEO's and other top level executives in media, marketing, finance, and advertising. They are concentrated in a few major metropolises. Whitehead gives this stark summary of the new social order in the United States, and I quote:

"The situation intensifies the shift of power in society as a whole. With the middle class divided, the center cannot hold. The dominant forces in society become Upscale America and Downscale America – or more precisely, Upscale America *versus* Downscale America. Upscale America uses its power to secure privileges such as proposed cuts in the capital gains tax. Downscale America strikes back blindly through rising rates of crime. Through the old social ladder, the expanding middle class acted as the nation's glue. With the new social ladder, the new middle class is merely caught in the crossfire."

### **III. Jesus' Economics**

Jesus' parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus is a reminder to us that how we treat the poor and the homeless is God's primary evidence of our faith. John M. Perkins says that we must take on the "three R's of development" if we are to fulfill God's expectations. Perkins' three R's are these: Relocation, Reconciliation and Redistribution.

Relocation involves becoming accessible to the poor, living with them as neighbors.

Reconciliation involves acknowledging the dignity of the poor. According to Perkins, we must be willing to receive the forgiveness of the poor and then actually be forgiven by them.

The third "R" – Redistribution – means that we are to help the poor to break the cycle of poverty by sharing with them skills, resources, technology, and education.

All of this is difficult. Some among us are living as Downscale Americans, being poor and seeing little hope of bettering our situation. Most of us are members of the shrinking Middle Class. I would guess that none of us in this room are Rich, Upscale Americans.

That said, I acknowledge the difficulty of being middle class and hearing the parable we have heard today. We cannot fully identify with the Rich Man because we do not experience ourselves as living lives of luxury. At the same time, we cannot fully identify with Lazarus. We are not starving. We are not even hungry, most of us. We do not know what it is to lie in the doorway of an abandoned building waiting to die. As middle class Americans – whether we are bright collar, new collar or blue collar – we tend to feel caught in the middle.

At a meeting years ago, then Bishop, Roy Sano, made the remark that we are no longer a society of haves and have nots. A new group has emerged, the group of those who have "been had." In the current round of elections, the economy is so important to us because we have "been had" for too long. Scraping along to make our house payments, working hard and helping others when we can, the middle class is fed up and worn out.

I believe God has compassion for persons caught in the middle in this recession – which is supposedly over, I hear... Our financial struggles continue, regardless.

God knows the pressures people are under. At the same time, the Word of God, the scriptures, the stories told by our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, stand as true as ever. In spite of the recession, in spite of our economic worries, God continues to expect us to be faithful.

Today's reading from the words of Jesus tells us clearly that we are to care for the poor. When they suffer we are to remember that the rich are held accountable by God.

The story doesn't say how Lazarus came to be poor. Jesus doesn't seem to care if he was partly to blame for his troubles. The bottom line is that, while there are poor people, God will watch the actions of the rich and judge them according to their actions.

Do they treat the poor well? Do they seek to relocate, reconcile, and redistribute? Or do they close their eyes to the suffering of others?

The question for the middle class, for you and me, is this: "With whom will we align ourselves?"

Sure, there are poor people who do drugs or abuse alcohol or commit crimes. Sure, there are poor people who seem to deserve what they get. We need to be smart in how we help others. We don't give booze money to an alcoholic. We don't trust a burglar with the keys to our homes.

At the same time, we need to answer the question: "With whom will we align ourselves?"

Sure, there are rich people who seem to deserve their wealth, having worked hard for it. We need to be compassionate towards rich people. We need to make room for them to use their wealth to serve God.

In short, we need to understand that God loves and seeks after both the rich and the poor. But the question still remains, “With whom will we align ourselves?”

The scriptures make the answer both easy and difficult. It’s easy to see God’s bias for the poor in the Bible. Make no mistake about it – if we want to align ourselves with God, we need to align ourselves with the poor.

This same easy answer is difficult, and we know why. Rich people are easier to accept than poor people. Rich people bring solutions with them, not problems. Rich people seem to be able to help us; poor people seem only to need our help.

Luckily, with God on our side we don’t need any other riches. The riches of God’s kingdom outweigh the riches of this world. It’s true. It’s hard to believe. But it’s true.

If we seek out the poor and the underclass, and if we seek to be in authentic relationship with them, God will work miracles in this place. I believe that any financial worries we might have about our church will melt away if we continue to seek new ways to serve the poor together.

We are Christians. We follow Christ. Christ tells us to love the poor, the least among us. And if we relate to the poor as friends and neighbors, we will be surprised by the spiritual riches God has hidden there. The poor have many gifts to offer, if we will receive them. The idea is to work alongside the poor as equals in God’s sight. This is very different from “helping” the poor, in the form of the rich doing something kind for the poor. It’s a very different model. It’s a kingdom model, involving shared resources and shared relationships. Shared lives.

Just before he retired as president of the World Bank, Barber Conable spoke to an American assemblage, saying, “You know, one of the great problems we have in this country is we think of poverty as a relative term. We have absolutely no acquaintance with it in absolute

terms, and so you can't talk about the quality of life without beginning to focus on the more than a billion people who are living on less than a dollar a day. That is not what Americans would define as living."

Many members of this church have been on mission trips and done mission work and supported mission work in severely impoverished areas of our world. I think of Deb and the Sierra Service Project; I think of Allison, recently returned from Honduras. I think of the youth group and their ongoing commitment to Skid Row ministry. This is not an exhaustive list; I could go on. My point is that we are trying, here at home and abroad, to walk among the poor as God intends.

It's a tough assignment to live with the poor as neighbors, to seek their forgiveness, and to share our resources with them. We can't do it alone, as individuals. We can't save the world by ourselves. Together, with God's help, we can make a difference.

### **Closing.**

As many of you know, the church has a Good Samaritan fund to which folks can make donations if they want to. It's a pastor's discretionary fund; I can choose to help the poor out of this fund as I see fit.

I have made a choice, for many reasons, not to give out money to folks who stop by the office asking for help. At this time, we also have no resources for handing out food to hungry folks who stop by. Instead, we refer them to other resources in the community that we support as a church, like the food pantry.

In my opinion, this is legitimate. Although we may hope to do more for local homeless and hungry folks in the future, what we are doing at present is donating food and money to the

community food pantry. We are pooling our resources with other caring folks in the Yucaipa area.

I close with a quotation, adapted from T. T. Crabtree by Adrian Dieleman. It makes me uncomfortable. It causes me to pause and reflect. Maybe it will do the same for you.

I WAS HUNGRY

I WAS HUNGRY and you circled the moon.

I WAS HUNGRY and you told me to wait.

I WAS HUNGRY and you set up a commission.

I WAS HUNGRY and you talked about bootstraps.

I WAS HUNGRY and you told me I shouldn't be.

I WAS HUNGRY and you had napalm bills to pay.

I WAS HUNGRY and you said, "Machines do that kind of work now."

I WAS HUNGRY and you said, "The poor are always with us."

I WAS HUNGRY and you said, "Law and order comes first."

I WAS HUNGRY and you blamed it on the Communists.

I WAS HUNGRY and you said, "So were my ancestors."

I WAS HUNGRY and you said, "We don't hire over 35."

I WAS HUNGRY and you said, "God helps those who help themselves."

I WAS HUNGRY and you said, "Sorry, try again tomorrow."

Jesus' story is a challenge to us. God's Word is a challenge to us. May we continue to seek God's will. May we continue to seek more ways to align ourselves with the poor among us. Amen.