

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

One of my favorite movies when I was growing up was a Disney movie entitled, “The Prince and the Pauper.” The movie was based on the book by Mark Twain, of the name. It is a story of two boys Edward Tudor, the long-awaited male heir to the throne of England, and Tom Canty, the unloved son of a beggar and thief. The boys meet, realize that they look very similar, and decide to change clothes and change lives. The story is about a role reversal and seeing life from a different perspective is a transforming experience for the two boys.

In the story of the rich man and Lazarus a surprising role reversal takes place. This role reversal enables the listeners and readers of the story to look at life from a different perspective, and in doing so to arrive at a deeper understanding of life and of what is involved in being a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Jesus begins the story by identifying the two main characters—a rich man and Lazarus. The original listeners to this story would have perked up their ears immediately. The rich man doesn’t have a name. The man’s dress and behavior identify him as an important individual. He should have had a name, but he does not. On the other hand, the poor man, who is anonymous to everyone including the rich man does have a name—Lazarus. Lazarus means, “The one God has helped.”

We know the names of people who are important to us. People in groups with whom we do not want to associate remain nameless. We find ourselves talking about groups like, “The Muslims,” “The illegal immigrants,” or “The gays.” Viewpoints radically change when we put a name and a face on to a member of the group.

The fact that the rich man does not have a name foreshadows what is going to happen further into the story. It also reveals God’s priorities. Though we may

be impressed by expensive and the size of a person’s bank account, God isn’t. God pays attention to the heart of a person and that person’s needs.

As disciples of Jesus Christ, God’s values should be our values, and God’s will should be our will. The stewardship of our lives should emphasize distribution—sharing, rather than accumulation. We should not be impressed by wealth but rather concerned by need. This will not mean the same to each of us, and we will respond to God’s priorities in different ways. The central concept, though, that God is not impressed with wealth and things, and neither should we be impressed by them, should be one of the guiding principles of our lives. We should live in the reality that the things of this world have decreasing dividends for us.

Some people have used this passage of Scripture as a description of heaven. I don’t believe that was Jesus’ intention. Jesus told a story with a specific message. The message was not to confirm the presence of Hades or a great gulf. Hades, a great gulf, Abraham’s bosom, and torment, were all parts to a good story. But they aren’t really what is important here.

The original listeners to this story were probably dumbfounded. Jesus’ description of the afterlife was exactly opposite of what they imagined. They understood that the rich were blessed by God—that was why they were rich. Conversely, the poor were cursed by God. In this story that Jesus tells, Lazarus is in Abraham’s bosom, and the rich man is in Hades—a place of torment. What a role reversal!

As Jesus tells the story, he doesn’t share why each man ended up where he did. The listener gets the impression that Lazarus is not in Abraham’s bosom because of something he did, but simply because of grace. On the other hand,

there’s the implication that the rich man is in Hades not because he is rich, but because he did not attempt to share his wealth and help those in need.

Nothing else is said about the placement of these two men. Their positions in the afterlife simply illustrate Jesus’ message. The listener, or those of us who now read this story, are left to ponder its meaning in our lives, and how it affects our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ.

The story continues with the rich man pleading with Abraham to send Lazarus with a little water to ease his suffering, and a message to save his brothers. Note that the rich man addresses Abraham as an equal and never speaks to Lazarus. Old habits die hard.

Abraham says a curious thing. He reminds the rich man that the brothers have the law and the prophets just like everyone else. If they don’t believe because of the law and the prophets, then they won’t believe even if someone were to rise from the dead. This is an interesting comment, when we know that soon Jesus will do just that—rise from the dead.

Abraham doesn’t speak for God. The future is not locked in. There will be a resurrection and perhaps the rich man’s brothers and others will believe. Certainly, we have beheld the resurrection, and we have believed. The resurrection—and the truth it proclaims—is not merely to assure us of a comfortable afterlife. The resurrection is also to affect how we live our lives, and how we express God’s will and God’s priorities in our words and deeds. We know that this life isn’t all there is. We know that there is life after death. We are invited to live out our lives in light of this new vision and in this new economy of life.

Wise investors invest their money wisely. They do not sock away their cash underneath a mattress, or in a chequing account with 0% interest. They don’t invest their money in get rich quick schemes, or fly by night opportunities.

Instead, wise investors place their money in financial instruments that give a good return on their investment.

We have beheld the resurrection. We realize that the things of the world are items with decreasing dividends. As wise investors—and as disciples of Jesus Christ—we place our time, talent and treasure in that which will last—God’s kingdom—a kingdom of sharing. Amen