

Sermon for the Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost: Luke 16:19-31
The Rev. Brooks Cato

I know y'all've heard stories about my Grandmother Sue. Sue was my dad's mom, and she was the southernmost of southern women. If she'd had a cameo in *Steel Magnolias*, you'd've wondered why she didn't get more screen time. Sue and her family were like a Eudora Welty novel come to life. Adhering strictly to Robert's Rules of Order, Sue was even duly elected as the undisputed Queen of the Universe. You may not have known you lived under benevolent rule, but that's because she ruled with such a velvet hand. Anyway, Sue represented the South that the South wasn't anymore. Or maybe never was. She was genteel and opinionated and aware of social ills. Sue surrounded herself with family and had us grandkids wrapped around her finger like Scarlett O'Hara with so many beaux. Sue was well loved, respected in business, idolized in the Sunday School class she taught. But she also had a cutthroat side that few saw. Sue was a commercial real estate agent, mostly dealing in hotels, and the men she worked with had seen her stand up fierce and unflinching, and they worshiped her, and they bent over backwards to keep themselves on her good side.

Most of the time, at family events, the Sue we saw, the Sue we got, was that Southern lady with feet propped up in her curl-up-and-dye chair with grandkids rubbing lotion into her bunions - a place of true honor if ever there was one. But once in a blue moon, we saw the cutthroat Sue burst out, and when she did, look out. Sue had a temper that was slow to rise but volcanic when it did. Such offenses that brought out the iron fist were wearing white shoes after Labor Day, calling her "grandma" in public, and using cuss words from the backseat of her Cadillac. Cadillacs, you see, aren't fit for such language. Cussin's reserved for farm trucks. Cadillacs demand a degree of decorum. Sue also used to get every one of us grandkids a new edition of Monopoly every Christmas. I don't know if she forgot that she'd gotten us all Monopoly last year, or if she figured we'd played so much that we must've worn out the game in the course of the year, or if it was a kind of inside joke with herself knowing that we all had dozens of boxes of Monopoly stowed away. It was almost like she was training us up for the family business, the commercial real estate agent stocking up apprentices one miserable game at a time. She also taught us the near-guaranteed way to win, which is a pretty nasty strategy, if I'm honest. Oh what the heck, I'll spill the beans: did you know, when you get four houses on a property you can buy a hotel, but you don't have to? Yeah, you can just stop at four houses. Well, if you do that over and over again, you create a housing shortage and no one else can buy houses. Told ya it was nasty. Monopoly is not a game to play with friends you'd like to keep.

But all that about Sue makes me wonder about the professions we inhabit or inhabited and how they shaped us. Like, some of us chose our line of work, some of us just ended up doing a particular job. Some of us could've been anything and some of us couldn't imagine doing anything else. But we all end up doing something, and I think that something shapes us. A third of each day, we are a certain person in our work. It's really, really hard to get home and turn off whatever the day demanded of us. Veterinarians sometimes come home and tut over their dogs' itchy paws. Teachers sometimes run their household like a kindergarten classroom. Priests do everything pastoral and holy-like. Joking aside, maybe you see what I mean? I think our work

seeps out of the confines of work and into the rest of our lives, so much so that it really does matter that there's some consistency from who you are there to who you are at home to who you are here. Put another way, would church you or at home you be satisfied with at work you? And along with all that, there's always a certain degree of status that comes with your line of work. Lawyers and doctors and teachers and garbage collectors and the guy that unclogs storm drains and the woman that picks your blueberries and the woman that owns the field of blueberries, they all occupy a certain status. Maybe it's the money that comes with the 1 position, but not always. In First Timothy, it's not the money itself that's the problem. It's the love of that money. But maybe it's more than that. Maybe it's the love of the status that comes with money.

Just like our work works on us, I think we get accustomed to the status of our jobs. There's a way we expect to be treated, good or bad, because of what we do. Sometimes that's sorta neutral, but sometimes it's a nasty thing. Look at this rich man wallowing in his wealth and really loving that he can. When he up and dies, what's fascinating to me is that he's not worried about where his dragon's hoard has gone to. He looks around, and the first thing he does is look for someone else, someone he's been trained to recognize as lower status, he looks around and he demands poor Lazarus fetch him a drink. He couldn't possibly go looking for it himself, that's low, and that's beneath him. I know that my Grandmother Sue felt that way a lot, I saw it. Waiters were servers, which in her mind was just as near in reality as it was linguistically to servants. Everything had to be just so, because that's what she demanded. And that same server as servant expectation crept into her home life. Sue had a way of looking around when she arrived to a new place and demanding with her very presence to be treated with the deference she deserved. She was, after all, the Queen of the Universe.

Now, there's a whole lot more going on in that parable. We could dwell on the whole stack of things, but for today, we'll just hit the highlights. First, before you decide that this is precisely what the afterlife is like, two things: there are about a million and a half depictions of the afterlife in scripture, and they vary wildly. Could this be it? Sure. Is it absolutely? I have no idea, and I question anyone who says they know for certain. Also, this is a parable, which should tell you from the get go that metaphors abound. It just might be that Jesus isn't telling us this story to explain the afterlife. It just might be that he has something else in mind for us to glean.

So if that's true, if this isn't about the afterlife so much as something else, what might that be? I think it's twofold. First off, I think it highlights the illusion that is status in our world. We made that up, all of it. We made up money and we made up earthly hierarchies shored up by wealth or influence or beauty or whatever. Whatever it is, when it comes down to it, none of that matters. We made it up. What matters, and this is the second part, is not what earthly advantages we have. What matters is what we do with them, especially in regards to other people. Do we wallow in wealth while the poor starve at our doorstep? Do we expect to be treated a certain way by virtue of gracing an audience with our presence? Do we revel in that made up status when we're in work-mode but love our neighbor only when we're off the clock? Last week, we heard Jesus say, "You cannot serve two masters." I wonder if this week there's a deeper challenge, not only can you not serve two masters, but you cannot survive as two people, the one invested in the

made up things of this world and the one trying to make nice. I suspect the one slowly consumes the other, and living in that tension grows a chasm in our hearts.

Now, I do think there is a reason for couching this parable in the context of the afterlife. It positions this issue as a matter of great urgency. We gotta fix this and we gotta fix this now. It cannot wait. Lazarus at my gate cannot wait another minute for me to get one last dive into my pool filled with gold doubloons. No, we have to recognize -- right now -- that who we are in the world's eyes gives no weight to who we are in God's eyes. If we have wealth, if we have status, if we create beauty or have beauty or whatever, we have choices. We will always use those things. Jesus asks us to use those things we have not to our own advantage but to the advantage of those who do not. And to do it now.