

Bad Investments
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Sept. 29, 2013
Lynn Japinga

Texts: Jer. 32, Luke 16:19-31, I Tim 6:6-19

A few years ago I was in Chicago for a meeting and I was walking alone on Michigan Avenue at night. A bit ahead of me I saw a guy panhandling, and without thinking too much about it, I made a wide berth around him. Then I heard him call after me. "I'm not going to hurt you," he said.

I'm guessing most of us are good at making a wide berth around people who are poor. The conventional wisdom is, don't give money to panhandlers. They will just use the money to buy alcohol. It's a scam. They would rather than beg than work. Giving money just encourages them. They should go to a shelter if they need help. So we avert our eyes, make a wide berth, and try not to feel so uncomfortable.

The rich man in the gospel story was also good at making a wide berth around people who are poor. And who could blame him? Lazarus was not only poor but sick, with open sores all over his body. He was so weak that he could not shoo away the dogs that came to lick his sores. And he was hungry. But he wasn't asking for money. He would have been happy with the crumbs, the leftovers, the scraps that got put in the trash.

Ann Kansfield, pastor of Greenpoint Reformed Church in Brooklyn, said this week that somebody went through the trash bags outside of their food pantry. That's hunger.

So the rich man made a wide berth. He averted his eyes. He pretended not to notice. Or maybe he used a different gate so that he would not have to see Lazarus and his disgusting sores.

It is hard to see poverty so we do our best to avoid it. We try not to make eye contact. We cross the street. We choose to live in neighborhoods where poor people don't live. And our society is happy to help. In many communities poor people live in certain neighborhoods – the other side of the tracks, the inner city, the slums, the projects. They go to certain schools. Some cities try to regulate panhandling so as not to offend the tourists.

I'm not sure this is a result of lack of care or sensitivity. I think most people feel badly when they see homeless people, or when they encounter poverty. They feel guilty because they have more than they need. And they feel powerless. What can we do in the face of such need? We can give a dollar, but it is only a drop in the bucket. We are overwhelmed by the depth of the need and the persistence of the problem. So it seems easier to avert our eyes and make a wide berth, so that we don't have to see.

In American politics and culture we often go a step further. It is not just that we avoid seeing the problems of poverty. We have made poverty into a moral failure. So in the recent debate about food stamps you heard arguments like this: Poor people don't need food stamps or welfare. They need jobs!!! They need to stop being so lazy. They need to quit drinking or using drugs.

They need to go to work and earn their way. There is not much awareness of the fact that parent working at a minimum wage job still cannot meet the most basic needs of a family. When politicians vote against food stamps and welfare, I wonder if they know anyone who is poor?

Our religious faith can also contribute to this, because the Bible says in some places that God will reward good people with wealth. So it seems logical to conclude that wealthy people are being blessed by God and poor people are being punished.

But the big reason that we despair of ever fixing this problem of inequity is that it is just too big. It has gone on too long. Lyndon Johnson started the War on Poverty in the 1960s and that war is a long way from over.

The Old Testament lesson for today seems unconnected to the gospel. Jeremiah has been put in jail because he has been the bearer of bad news. He told King Zedekiah that the Babylonians were going to win this war, and that Jerusalem would be sacked, and the king would be carried off in humiliation. Well, no king wants to hear that. Why did Jeremiah have to be so negative all the time!!! And it's true that most of what Jeremiah said was negative; and with good reason. At the time of this story, the army of Babylon was at the gate of Jerusalem. The rest of the nation of Israel had already been either destroyed or carried off in the last century. And destruction was imminent for the city of Jerusalem, even if King Zedekiah refused to deal with reality.

But then Jeremiah did something very strange. A family member came to him, asking if Jeremiah would buy a piece of property. The family member was probably broke, and needed the money to get away from the Babylonian armies. But the Israelites took family land so seriously that they could only sell to a family member. The problem was that this piece of land was likely already occupied by the Babylonian army! It wasn't worth anything. But more importantly, it had no future!!! After all, Jeremiah had said over and over again that the city of Jerusalem would be attacked, the people would be carried off, and strangers would live in their land. Why would you pay money for a piece of land that was occupied by your enemies? That was a very bad investment; a waste of money.

But that was just the point. Despite all the bad news and doom and gloom, Jeremiah believed that destruction would not have the last word. It looked bad now. It looked like the end of the line for the Israelites and their land. But it wasn't. Someday the people would return and they would again buy and sell land. So Jeremiah arranged to have the paperwork stored in a earthen jar so that it could be found later when the Israelites returned. Jeremiah did not return. He did not see the restoration. He didn't get to use his land. It was a bad investment ... but it was a sign of hope.

Maybe the rich man in the parable thought that caring for Lazarus was a bad investment. After all, the guy was clearly close to death. Why give him food and shelter? What a waste.

And a lot of public policy seems to be rooted in a similar idea. Why give out welfare and food stamps when it simply encourages people in their poverty? Why give to panhandlers when they

might spend it on booze? Why allow undocumented immigrants to stay in the country. Won't it just encourage more of them to come? Why give more money to struggling schools systems? Students will keep failing anyway? Why waste our money? Why make such bad investments?

John Calvin lived in Geneva, Switzerland, which was a safe place for refugees from all over Europe in the 16th century. He had some things to say about money. Whatever we have been given, it is to share. Our money does not belong to us, but to God. We need to see poor people as made in the image of God. We don't look at their merit, or their work ethic, or their drug tests. Everybody is in the image of God and should not be despised. And then he said something even more radical. When exercising kindness, there is no limit than the end of your resources. This is a hard saying.

We often feel powerless, so it's easy to do nothing. But there are so many ways to invest in the work of God's kingdom.

Some investments don't require any money. We can start by seeing and hearing and attending and paying attention. We can look people in the eye. We can rearrange our lives a bit so that we actually encounter people who are poor. We can listen to their stories.

We can invest our time and energy. We can walk in the crop walk. We can buy something every week at the grocery store that we donate to a food pantry. We could mentor someone who needs help with finances. We could sign up for Kid's Hope.

Are these actions a bad investment? A waste of time? Maybe. But just as Jeremiah's action was a powerful symbol of his hope for the future, so we can engage in symbolic actions that show hope rather than despair. No, we cannot fix the entire educational system. But we can make a difference in the life of one student. No, we cannot cure poverty. But we can take the panhandler to buy a sandwich. Or we can bring a box of cereal or a can of tuna to church every week. Or we can be generous with our resources.

Taking symbolic actions doesn't mean we ignore the big picture. There are serious problems with our educational system and our economic system and we should be aware of those. But we can start by seeing what is close to us. The small but significant actions can make a big difference, in the lives of other people, and our own.

God has been gracious to us. God has seen us. God has made bad investments in all of us. So let's respond by making some bad investments. Let's give our time and money and energy to people that seem worthless in the eyes of the world but are human beings made in God's image.

I've used this line before, but it's a good one. We've all made excuses. Now let's make a difference. Amen.