

(The parable of the rich man and Lazarus became an underlying principle in the life and work of Albert Schweitzer.
What principles might we find for our growth today as we study the parable and Schweitzer?)

INTRODUCTION

This parable is a good one for considering
what we notice – noticing things -
greater truths that are important for faithful and fruitful lives.

There is an underlying pattern of unity – some underlying principles
in these lives we live - really in the universe.
Sometimes those principles are expressed in parables.

Part of our learning is to discern the unity and orient our lives in its direction.
We tend to notice what we expect - and filter out the rest.
That is the challenge.

What are a few examples?

Here is an example – a current example.
I don't know if it is accurate or not.
It is just an illustration to get us thinking about underlying principles.

EXAMPLES OF UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES

Did you hear that this week that the recession is over?
An official panel of economists announced it this week.
The recession ended in June, 2009.

Aftershock is a book released about a year ago.
It's authors published a book a few years ago called *Bubblequake*.
The book described what its authors
thought would happen with the recession -
and they were pretty accurate.

They foretold the pop of the housing bubble
and the stock market bubble -
phenomena we observed in the last few years.
They predict that the same thing will happen
with the dollar and U.S. debt.

I know little about economics of this nature
so don't hear me as advising about anything like that.
It is just a current illustration -
not advice to anyone.

The authors say that we have found ourselves as a nation
in a deep recession because
we have not noticed an underlying principle at work
at work in our economy.

We have failed to notice a fundamental principle
that underlies the disruption
in these segments of our economy
housing – stock market – private debt – the dollar – and the national debt.
They call these bubbles.
That fundamental principle is this.
As home prices rose
the incomes of American workers
did not keep up with the price of housing.

Even behind that – productivity did not keep up with it.
Increases in incomes and productivity did not drive an increase
in the cost of real estate.
That is why it could not be sustained.
The bubble had to burst.
Again – it is an illustration -
not advice about the economy.

They tell us we might have avoided the housing bubble
if advisors had noticed this disconnect
between productivity and personal income and housing prices.

Underlying principles can be important
Again – this illustration is a message from the authors of
a current book that has become popular.
It may be accurate. It may not.

Another illustration of underlying principle:

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Let's keep this idea of underlying principles in mind -
which we may or may not notice -
and return to our parable.

THE PARABLE AND THE PRINCIPLE

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus
is the one Albert Schweitzer said
compelled him to leave a career
as a one of the foremost concert organists in Europe
and expert on Bach
holder of a coveted teaching position in Vienna
and as a Lutheran pastor
to work with people
in a very primitive culture in deepest Africa.

He went where he thought there was the greatest need -
and that is where he dedicated the work of his life.

Why?

It was because of a fundamental principle in the parable.

We are to act out of compassion
not out of self interest.

We are to pay attention to imbalances
in economics – in justice – and in health
that occur in life on this earth -
and be at work to create balance.

We are to have reverence for all of life.
and live in such a way that shows it.

WHAT WE OFTEN MISS

The problem is – is that we become immune to seeing
what we don't want to see.

Who wants to see someone destitute
on the ground outside our door?

In fact – when we do – we usually blame them.

But - there is a principle of underlying unity
and we know that we are related - by virtue of being here breathing.

And we know it from the life and teachings of Jesus.

And when we take this seriously as Schweitzer did
it empowers us to create bigger purpose for our lives.
Because this parable is so connected with Albert Schweitzer

I would like to talk more about his life.

I would also like to suggest some underlying principles
that may have been at work in his early life

that gave him a foundation for his life's work.

SCHWEITZER

Albert Schweitzer was the first theologian
in modern time to search for the historical Jesus.
He was the first to try and extricate Jesus
from the trappings that came
with the Roman church that elevated Jesus to God -
and discounted him as teacher and healer.

Neither the academic or religious leaders at the time were ready for it.
They seemed to scarcely notice it.
But Schweitzer took the teachings of Jesus seriously
and tried to orient his life to follow them.

Perhaps Schweitzer already had a sense of oneness
with his fellow human beings from his upbringing.
He was already in some ways compelled
to delve into life and all its messiness.
He came from a family of the Enlightenment
who valued rational thought
and taught tolerance to their children.

There was also something else.

SCHWEITZER AND BACH

From the time he was a child Schweitzer
played the music of Bach and was fascinated by
the way Bach composed music.
And when you study the music of Bach
You learn to look for underlying principles
and even an underlying balance in construction.

Bach was a master of counterpoint.
Counterpoint is the art of combining different voices (or notes)
in composing music.
combining notes in ways that work – one after the other.
It's not harmony but a series of one after another
sometimes an imitation – sometimes different.
The important thing is that each note – each voice - is important.
You can pick up on an underlying balance as you listen to Bach.

It is just a thought –
but I wonder if it conditioned Schweitzer
to look for underlying principles in life itself.

Schweitzer worked with his own teacher
Charles Marie Vidor in helping students learn to play Bach's music.

He thought Bach's work was sacred in itself.
He thought it a blessing.

To play Bach with others was to strive for perfection -
and reach toward the divine.
And so – they imagined a voice saying as they began their work:
"Put off thy shoes from off thy feet,
for the place whereon thou stand is holy ground."¹

I hope you enjoy our Bach today -
as it is no coincidence
that we bring it to you on a day we mention Schweitzer.

This is why it seems to me that Schweitzer's work with music
especially Bach
contributed to the man he came to be.

INTEGRATION INTO OUR LIVES

It prompts me to think about how we all
integrate the stages of our lives –
and how the different things we study and learn and do
may become guiding principles for the years as they come.

Where have you learned compassion in a deep and formative way?
Where have you learned honesty?
Where have you learned to take care of the environment?
Where have you learned that gratitude is more fulfilling than selfishness?

And what are you still learning?

I will share a few more of Schweitzer's thoughts
because they all take on the character of principles for living.

Usually – we can see or hear our parable
the rich man and Lazarus in the background.

SCHWEITZER'S PRINCIPLES FOR LIVING

He took the question seriously about whether
he was here only to seek out his own happiness.

Perhaps that is where the rich man in the parable
caught his attention.
The rich man's attention was only on himself.

Schweitzer became clearer all the time that we who enjoy
many of the great things in life
have a responsibility to give to others no less
than we have received.

He noticed the contrast of happiness and suffering
and believed we are to share the burdens.

He took his very fine education
and applied it to what became his principle for living:
Reverence for life

He stated it like this: "I am life that wills to live
in the midst of other life that wills to live."

Many of the things we have today from Schweitzer
come to us in a kind of principle.
You can almost see the picture
or the rich man and Lazarus in the background.

"A great secret of success is to go through life
as a man who never gets used up."

"I don't know what your destiny will be,
but one thing I know: the only ones among you
who will be really happy
are those who will have sought and found how to serve."

"A man is ethical only when life, as such, is sacred to him,
that of plants and animals as that of his fellow men,
and when he devotes himself helpfully
to all life that is in need of help."

"Constant kindness can accomplish much.
As the sun makes ice melt,
kindness causes misunderstanding,
mistrust, and hostility to evaporate."

"Success is not the key to happiness.
Happiness is the key to success.
If you love what you are doing,
you will be successful."

"By respect for life we become religious
in a way that is elementary, profound and alive."

In closing – I hear in the background the parable of the rich man and Lazarus
in most everything I read about Schweitzer.

I wonder how it would enrich our lives
if each of us had a parable or a teaching of Jesus
that became an underlying principle
and a driving force in our life.
That is why I treasure these stories
and return to them often.
What would you do differently?
How would you integrate it into your life?
And if your story is this one – about reverence for life -
what might you change in your life
to live into it?

¹ *J.S. Bach Organ Works, Volume II Preludes & Fugues* by Ch. M. Vidor and A. Schweitzer. G. Schirmer.
New York. 1940