

**“PLACING OUR HOPE IN A JAR”**  
**Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15; Luke 16:19-31**  
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Ron Cey was the third baseman for the Los Angeles Dodgers baseball team for much of the 1970's. He was a man who had such an odd and slow stride that he was named “the penguin” by Tommy Lasorda. He was also a six time All-Star, an above-average fielder, compiled a lifetime batting average of .261, and hit over 300 home runs in his career. He was involved in one of the most horrific moments in any World Series when, in 1981, he was hit in the head by a pitch from Rich “Goose” Gossage; and that moment is widely credited as being a turning point for the Dodgers as they came back from a two game deficit to win the World Series. All of this is interesting to a few of you I would guess, but all of you may be wondering why the minutiae of Ron Cey's major league career warrants a mention in a sermon. I bring up Ron Cey this morning because I believe that the theme that ties our two scripture lessons together is “investment” and, at one time in my life, Ron Cey personified investment.

I spent a great deal of time during my elementary and middle school years collecting and trading baseball, football, and hockey cards. I still have most of those cards, and Shauna will roll her eyes and attest to the fact that we have moved boxes and albums of those cards with us wherever we have lived. If you were to open up those albums, you would notice they were organized by team, and it would be clear that I had several players who were my favorites. Nowhere would this be more true than when looking at my Los Angeles Dodgers section, where you couldn't help but notice that along with Don Drysdale, Steve Garvey, and Fernando Valenzuela, there are probably 20 Ron Cey cards that stretch from the beginning of his career all the way into the years when his skills were declining and he had moved on to play for the Chicago Cubs. The existence of those 20 cards may tell you that I was invested in Ron Cey, but it doesn't tell you the whole story. In order to do that, I must tell you that at one time in my life I would have traded nearly any card in my collection to get another Ron Cey card. I remember arguments with a couple of my friends who offered me nearly every card they had, if only I would trade them a Ron Cey card so they could complete their set. I never made those trades, and the continued existence of those Ron Cey cards attest to the investment I had in those cards and, to some degree, in Ron Cey. Life, however, is not all about baseball cards.

As we move from baseball cards to our scripture lessons, I believe we continue to uncover that which we value and that which we claim investment in. Our lessons, from Luke and Jeremiah are both rather confusing lessons, offering insight into our faith if only we can muddle our way through the complexity of the words and events. In our gospel reading, we hear a parable of a rich man and Lazarus. This is a morality tale, told in the form of a “folklore story concerning the afterlife.”<sup>1</sup> But really this story is not about what happens at the moment of our death; it is, instead, about the types of investments we make during our lifetime. This passage tells of a rich man who, upon his death, finds himself tormented because of the choices he made during his lifetime. The rich man discovers that while he persists in Hades, Lazarus, the poor man who once lay outside the gates of his home, has found comfort in death. This passage offers a stunning view of the reversal of fortunes that Jesus often spoke about, a reversal that Jesus indicated was necessary in order for the kingdom of God to come about. While the rich man

seemingly was invested in his fine linens and the status afforded him by his gated home, Lazarus had lay dying just outside. This passage is fascinating because even as the rich man attempts to find a way to get away from the torment of his own doing, he continues to play the role that placed him there in the first place. When he needs cool water, he asks Lazarus to get it for him; and when he wants to try to save his brothers from the hell he is experiencing, again he wants to send Lazarus—as if Lazarus is there to do his bidding. The rich man, far from being indicted because of his wealth, is being indicted because of his investment in his wealth. That is, the rich man cannot seem to get beyond the power that his wealth has always given him: he seems stuck there. But the chasm that is described in this passage is not a chasm between an Eden and the place of torment where the rich man has landed. Instead, the chasm that is described here exists between the apathetic, aloof, and shielded existence that the rich man had to live as he stepped over Lazarus to enter the gates of his property, and the other option that he had—to be invested not solely in himself, his money, or his stuff; but in his society, in his family, and in those who crowd around the gates and fences of his property. The chasm that exists here is based upon what the rich man has invested himself in. Jesus is not speaking at all about the amount of wealth that the rich man had; instead, Jesus is using this parable to speak about the rich man's lack of investment in compassion and love for anything other than his own interests. In this passage the last become first and the first become last, and Jesus would have us invest in no other system. But alas, for the rich man this is a bewildering concept that requires an investment strategy with a greater vision than he can imagine; and, thus, he remains stuck with an investment with little hope of long-term dividends.

Our lesson from Jeremiah, however, is based on the hopefulness of a long-term investment strategy. There are a lot of names and places in this passage so let me sort it out a bit: The Babylonians are practically beating down the walls to the city; soon Jerusalem and Judah will lie in ruins. And if we remember the ominous, angry, and prophetic words that Jeremiah has spoken as the voice of God, the coming destruction is exactly what Israel deserves. However, as the opposing armies prepare to attack, God instructs Jeremiah to purchase a field at Anathoth. The next part of the passage involves the ritual of procuring the deed, and doing so in a way that sets up a proper contractual agreement, complete with two parts to the deed, so that if there is any doubt about its authenticity Jeremiah would be able to prove his ownership. Then, after rushing around to make this purchase as the Babylonians ready their attack, Jeremiah is to take the deeds of this new purchase and place them in an earthenware jar “so that they may last for a long time.” This is an odd time to look for a great deal on real estate, but that is what Jeremiah does!

As odd as this moment seems, it is really a compelling moment because this purchase is about much more than a piece of property; it is about a promise for the future. This purchase shows proof of God's investment in Israel; it is another moment in the long history of Israel where God stands steadfast with Israel, even when it seems that everything is bleak and hopeless. Our scripture lesson ends with these words: “Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.” These are the most critical words of this passage, because they clearly promise a future for God's investment in the people of Israel. After all the ominous warnings that Jeremiah has spoken, this purchase signals something different: that a long-term investment has been made by God, and that although everything seems like it is just about to be lost, there is hope for Israel. And lest anyone forget about that hope, it has been placed in an earthenware jar.

As I read the scripture lessons I was made to think about what it is that we in contemporary times invest in. What is it that we value? Where do we get our sense of hope? I can look back at my baseball cards and see the naïve and uncomplicated life of a child; and, although there are moments when I long to return there, that isn't where I will find hope. The gospel of Jesus Christ calls us toward more than that. We can find ourselves like the rich man who had invested everything he had in his things and in status, or we can seek wisdom from the hopeful nature of Jeremiah's purchase. This is a purchase that calls us toward an investment strategy based on future returns of an extraordinary type. Forget looking toward the Standard and Poors Index, because the return we are called toward can only be measured in hope. This passage should also inspire hope in contemporary times. It should inspire us to pull on our rose-colored glasses and think our most hope-filled thoughts. Our culture tells us to invest in the present, it tells us to invest in that which can be measured, that which can easily be converted to dollars and cents, and honestly that is probably the paradigm out of which the rich man in Luke operated. But our faith calls us to something else entirely. Our faith calls us to put our hope in the immeasurable, in that which we cannot see, in that which is not provable; our hope will only be found in the love and grace of God. For Jeremiah, the deed in the earthenware jar was a tangible reminder of God's promise as well as a tangible reminder of what it means to follow God into the unknown. Honestly, I am not always very good at taking those types of risks—I tend to be someone who looks for the cautious way, for the easily calculated risk, or for the sure thing. However, as people of faith, we need to be less restricted, less cautious, and—above all else—we need to be more faithful. Jeremiah's purchase is valuable only in the hope that it inspires, because that land is about to be controlled by the army of the enemy. It could have been “Jeremiah's folly,” but instead it marks the promise of a bright future that is to come for Israel.

And so today, I am going to invite you to do something as a sign of our collective willingness to put our hope in God. In the pews you will find blue cards, and before the Hymn of Dedication I ask that you write down something that you would ask God's help with, something for which you need God's hope. And I invite you to come forward during the Hymn of Dedication to put your hope in the jars that are up here. This is our opportunity to dream and hope big—hope for a cure for what ails us, hope for peace in our time, hope for new life in your relationship—hope for whatever it is that you need. Place your hope in one of these jars and entrust it to God. It may be our folly, but our faith calls us to actively place our hope in God, and this is our chance. Invest in hope; invest in God's promise. You are invited to place your hope in one of these earthenware jars and trust the rest to our God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

<sup>1</sup>Loader, William via the web at: <http://www.staff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/LkPentecost18.htm>