



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

From Bigger Barns to Second Chances
The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
July 31, 2022
The Rev. Paul McLain

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

Dickie Scruggs had it all. In college, he was a handsome young man with a finely-toned physique. Dickie once looked in the mirror and said, 'You good-looking Greek god, don't you ever die.' A classmate overheard him and gave him the nickname Zeus, the king of the Greek gods, which stayed with him for life.

Dickie married the beautiful sister-in-law of a future United States Senator. He was the lead attorney in landmark cases suing asbestos and tobacco companies that not only changed public policies, but made him rich beyond his wildest dreams. Dickie had a private jet, hobnobbed with celebrities, and was considered America's most powerful trial lawyer.

But Dickie felt the pressure of living up to this reputation. He looked for other issues where he could earn another of what he called a 'big lick' case in the courtroom. He became addicted to pain pills to get him through his days. And he got caught up in a bribery scheme related to not sharing his legal fees with other attorneys.

Dickie was very frank in saying, "The judge in the case asked for money. Stupidly, I agreed to pay him." Dickie and his son Zach were sentenced to prison. Others in his circle of influence were punished. Many lives were hurt by this scandal. Zeus had received his comeuppance.

Dickie's story is like that of the two protagonists in our Gospel passage from Luke. One wants Jesus to tell his older brother to divide the family inheritance with him. His request prompts Jesus instead to tell the story of another man who became very rich, but became consumed with worry over his need to build bigger barns to store his great abundance. As Jesus explores the situations of both men, he goes a lot deeper than their financial situations. He is asking them and us this question, 'What do we really value?' The first man values an inheritance he does not yet have, but covets desperately. The man in the story values the riches he does have and he is desperate to store and enlarge them. What the rich man in the story is doing is not evil in and of itself. In fact, he is doing what Joseph instructed Pharaoh to do during a time of abundance to prepare for a time of famine. The result was the salvation of many people, including Joseph's own family.

But Joseph's focus was outward. He was making wise decisions to benefit those in need. For the rich man in the story told by Jesus, the focus is entirely inward. In essence, he is saying, *I* want to relax, eat, drink, and be merry. *I* want bigger barns!

Dickie Scruggs wanted bigger barns. But that fixation drew him into addictions – for drugs to ease the pain, for the next big windfall to enlarge his success, for feeling that he was invincible.

So often, we forget the rest of the stories of people who make headlines by going to prison. We can even feel a certain glee at the fall of the rich and powerful. And then we quickly move on to the next story.

But, for Dickie Scruggs, prison marked the beginning of a whole new chapter. He spent his first year not in a minimum-security prison, but a central prison facility with barbed wire in Kentucky. Dickie's job was to roll napkins for the cafeteria. He battled depression. He said he lost his sense of purpose.

A couple of things gave him a glimmer of hope. First, his wife Diane stood by him and visited him every weekend she was allowed to do so. Second, he read *Gone with the Wind*, all one thousand four hundred seventy-two pages. Dickie recalls, "There is a line from Rhett Butler that pretty much says it all: Until you've lost your reputation, you never realize what a burden it was or what freedom really is."

Dickie found a new place for himself in prison. He volunteered to be an adult education instructor. Students he taught and mentored graduated, earning their GED certificates. His eyes light up when he remembers, "Families came to the graduations. They whooped and hollered. They saw this as an opportunity, as something to celebrate."

After serving in prison for 6 years, most people thought Dickie Scruggs would take the money he had left and move away from Mississippi to a place where he would not be noticed or remembered for the bribery scandal. Instead, he moved back to Oxford where Diane had continued as a volunteer at First Presbyterian Church throughout her husband's time in prison. Dickie volunteered to be an adult education tutor for a community college. He also traveled around the state to learn about the need for some basic support for people trying to get their GED, much like the prisoners he tutored.

He decided to put the skills he learned in organizing major litigation to create a program to fill the gap he discovered. Appropriately, he called the non-profit organization Second Chance Mississippi. It has become the rest-of-life mission for Dickie and his son Zach, who was also involved in teaching in prison. Neither of them take a salary. Gone is the private jet. Instead, they drive around the state to any church, civic club, neighborhood association, or any group no matter how small that will listen to them. As a result of their efforts, over a thousand people have earned their GEDs or workplace certifications.

It hasn't been easy. A lot of folks in Mississippi were very wary of Dickie and Zach for their past and wondered if they had underlying motives for doing what they were doing. Dickie realized that and knew that he had to be as transparent as possible for Second Chance Mississippi to get off the ground. Dickie admitted he got too big for his britches. He talked candidly about his addiction to the pain pills. He shared his story of moving from depression to a sense of fulfillment during his time in prison. Dickie now says, "I'm happier today than I have ever been before."

In the story told by Jesus, God says to the rich man, “Your life is being demanded of you.” That is the truth for all of us, no matter our temporary financial station. In many ways, this scripture passage is less about finances, and more about coming to terms with our mortality. We are going to die. And we can’t take it, whatever it is, with us. The parable of the rich fool invites us to see that we have a finite opportunity to build and leave a legacy that is truly lasting in the economy of God and our neighbors. The scripture passage poses these questions to all of us: What are we going to do with the gifts that are the remaining days of our lives? Ultimately, what do we value? What are we going to leave behind? And what does it mean, at long last, to be rich toward God?

Our stories may not have the massive ups and downs of that of Dickie Scuggs. His story and the story told by Jesus invite us to let go of bigger barns and hold on to second chances. *Amen.*