

FIRST SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

LUKE 16:19-31

Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear friends in Christ Jesus,

St. Luke begins his Gospel by stating that what follows is an “orderly account” of “the things that have been accomplished among us,” that is, the life, death, and resurrection of Christ Jesus for sinners. We see something of that order in and around today’s Gospel lesson from Luke 16.

In context, the so-called parable of the rich man and Lazarus works as a conclusion to a much longer teaching of Jesus concerning the right use of wealth. Back in chapter 14, Jesus had said to a man, a ruler of the Pharisees, who had invited Him to dinner, “When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just” (vv. 12-14). In chapter 15, Jesus had told a series of parables about finding lost things—a sheep, a coin, a son—and how there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance (v. 7). Finally, at the beginning of this chapter, Jesus had encouraged His disciples to make friends for themselves by means of “unrighteous wealth,” so that when it fails they may receive them into eternal dwellings (v. 9).

But, we are told, when the Pharisees heard all these things, they ridiculed Jesus, for they were lovers of money (v. 14). So what if they only wanted to invite their friends to dinner? So what if they wanted to enjoy their good things? Is that so wrong? Is not every good and perfect gift from above (James 1:18)? Does not God provide His human creatures with food and clothing for their well-being and enjoyment (Matthew 6:25-33)? Of course He does. But the Pharisees had taken those gifts and turned them into idols. They were devoted to them, even served them. We know this, because of how they treated the poor, sending them away empty, while filling themselves with good things. They didn’t see it that way, of course. As far as they were concerned, they had nothing to repent of. They were children of Abraham! Nothing could separate them from the love of God!

Jesus tells this parable, then, in order to show them, these lovers of money, how mistaken they are. There are three characters: an unnamed rich man, a poor man named Lazarus, and Abraham. We learn about the first two men by means of contrast:

The rich man is described as wearing fine clothing; Lazarus is covered with sores. The rich man eats his fill every day; Lazarus hungers for table scraps. Eventually, the rich man dies and is buried, going down to Hades, or hell; Lazarus dies and is carried by the angels to Abraham's side, i.e., to a place of comfort.

Now, it's important to establish right away that the rich man does not go to hell because he is rich any more than Lazarus goes to heaven because he is poor. That would not be consistent with the rest of Scripture, which teaches clearly that it is by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone that we are saved (Ephesians 2:8). Economic status has nothing to do with it. The rich man went to hell because he did not believe in the name of the only Son of God, for, as it says in Acts 4:12, "there is salvation in no one else." Lazarus, on the other hand, did believe, and so had God as his help (which is, in fact, what the name Lazarus means).

The rich man, then, being in torment, lifts up his eyes and sees Abraham far off and Lazarus by his side (v. 24). Notice, the rich man recognizes Lazarus. He's seen him before—lying at his gate! He was not unaware of him and his situation; he must have passed by him a hundred times. He just didn't care. He was too busy enjoying his good things. After all, he was a child of Abraham, a Jew! He even calls Abraham "Father," asking for mercy in his anguish. But Abraham can't help him. It's too late for that. The rich man's lack of repentance and faith has damned him, and there are no second chances in hell.

So, he makes a plea for his five living brothers, saying, "Then I beg you, father, to send him [Lazarus] to my father's house...that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment" (vv. 27-28). One is struck by his compassion for his family. At least he has that. But, again, he's refused. Abraham says, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them." In other words, they don't need a special revelation to teach them God's will; they've already received it—in God's Word. "Moses and the Prophets" is a reference to the Old Testament, the first major division of the Bible, which contains many laws about caring for the poor, including this one from the fifth book of Moses, Deuteronomy: "If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be" (15:7-8). There it is, in plain Hebrew.

But, then, the rich man had also had Moses and the Prophets, and look where he ended up. Just because you know God's Word doesn't mean you believe it. Just because you have nice things doesn't mean God is pleased with you. Just because you belong to a certain nation or people group doesn't mean God is your friend. Sin makes us all

enemies of God from conception. Our default setting is “condemned.” And Jesus says unless we repent, we will all likewise perish.

But, you may be thinking, what do I have to repent of? I’m not like the Pharisees. I’m not rich. I’m not a lover of money. But consider the disciples’ response to Jesus’ words in Matthew 19 that “only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God” (vv. 23-24). As poor fishermen, you’d think this saying wouldn’t affect them much. In fact, it says, “When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, ‘Who then can be saved?’” (verse 25). They took Jesus’ words as a blanket conviction of all mankind. And they’re right. Rich or poor, we all have an idolatrous heart, which loves the things of this world. Martin Luther wrote that Mammon (i.e., money and possessions) is the most common idol on earth (LC I 6-7). Even if we don’t have a lot of it, what little we do have we cling to as our god, that thing which we believe can save us and make us feel safe. And if we’re holding onto it so tightly, we can’t very well give it away, can we?

Which brings us back to the parable. The rich man continues to cling to his false gods, saying, “No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent” (v. 30). He despises preaching and God’s Word, brushing it off as both impotent and uncertain. Sinners need a sign, he maintains, not mere words. But that certainly wasn’t the case for Pharaoh, who saw all kinds of signs and wonders in Egypt, and still refused to let God’s people go. Or the Pharisees, who saw Jesus perform miracle after miracle, healing the sick, casting out demons, and even raising the dead, and still came to the conclusion that He was in league with the devil (Luke 11:15). So Abraham responds, “If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead” (v. 31). Seeing isn’t believing; rather, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29), because faith is the gift of God, which comes wrapped in the word of Christ (Romans 10:17).

That word contains both Law and Gospel, both demands and promises. The Law says, “Repent; you’re a sinner. You have had other gods, and, as a result, you have passed by your neighbor in need. Therefore, you deserve to be in torment.” But the Gospel says, “Take heart; you’re forgiven. Jesus has kept the Law for you, and, as a result, God has accepted His blood on your behalf. Therefore, all who trust in Him will be saved.” Not only is this word certain, but it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes (Romans 1:16). It is living and active, able to cut right down to the heart, exposing our false gods and our failures (Hebrews 4:12); but also able to mend and repair: “with His wounds we are healed” (1 Peter 2:24).

As for signs, they are fleeting, our reason and all our senses impaired. The clarity we need to see our sin, to trust in Christ, and to love God and help and serve our neighbor comes only from hearing Moses and the Prophets. As Jesus says, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me” (John 5:39). Only the Scriptures are able to make us wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (2 Timothy 3:14-5), who just so happens to be risen from the dead, ascended and throned on high, for sinners.

So, if this parable challenges you, then good! That’s what it’s supposed to do. If not, then at least heed its warning: It may be too late for the rich man, but it’s not too late for you. Repent. Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all that you need will be added to you. Be faithful in unrighteous wealth, and God will entrust to you the true riches; not food and clothing, money and possessions, but the crown of righteousness, which is laid up for all who have loved His appearing (1 Timothy 4:8).

We have much to repent of. But through faith we are children of God, and nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you by His poverty might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9). We can ask Him as dear children ask their dear father. And He will have mercy on us. Already, He’s covered us with the robe of His righteousness and feeds us with the feast of His body and blood. So our only desire is to be with Him, and our prayer that “our Father in heaven would rescue us from every evil of body and soul, possessions and reputation, and finally, when our last hour comes, give us a blessed end, and graciously take us from this valley of sorrow to Himself in heaven” (SC Seventh Petition). God grant it for Jesus’ sake.

Amen. The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Soli Deo gloria

Questions for reflection:

1. How did this parable challenge you?
2. Why does God give us good things?
3. Of what bigger problem is our failure to share our good things a symptom?
4. Why is God’s Word needed to address this problem?
5. What’s the good news for us poor, miserable sinners?

Other thoughts and reflections: _____

