

All That Glitters...

Text: Luke 16:19-31

Hymn: "Lord, Thee I Love with All My Heart"

Things are not always what they seem. A guinea pig is neither from Guinea nor a pig. It's a rodent. An English horn is neither a horn nor originally English. Sweetbreads aren't sweet or even bread. And some who are rich really aren't rich at all. And some who are poor really aren't poor at all. Things are not always what they seem.

Look at the two main characters in Jesus' parable today. The one who had it all had nothing. Whereas the man who had nothing turns out to be the one who really had everything. The Psalmist is right: "Better is the little that the righteous has than the abundance of many wicked" (Ps 37:16).

The things of this life, and especially wealth, are not accurate barometers of what is going on in one's spirit. Or as our Lord says in Matthew 5, "God sends the rain on both the just and the unjust" (Mt 5:45). So the good things of God are not his way of patting you on the back, though some preachers preach that way. Likewise, bad things in this life are not God's way of slapping you upside the face. But as Ecclesiastes says, It is the same for all, since the same event happens to the righteous and the wicked (Eccl 9:2). The only thing we can really be sure about is what God's Word tells us, the Word that tells us that Jesus Christ was crucified and risen for us and for our salvation, which is the only way we know for sure that God is for us. And if you have Him, you are rich—"rich toward God," as Jesus says (Lk 12:21). Which it turns out is what rich really is, no matter how big your bank account may be, or how well you dress or don't.

You see, money is God's gift, no doubt about it. But money might be the very thing that may be making you so poor if you have turned it into an idol that you trust and

rely on as the highest good in life. And that is an easy mistake for us to make. For it seems like people who have a lot of money have it all. They have the kind of good life that any of us would want or envy. That's why people buy houses they can't afford, build up credit card debt they can't pay off, go to bed anxious at night for the next market correction, and even cheat, steal, and who knows what else to get ahead and stay ahead, all because money seems to offer the best that life has to offer.

But things are not always what they seem. And do not assume that because everything is prosperous on the outside a person is prospering on the inside. They might just be poor. And usually there are clues. What you believe is what you live. Whatever you believe is inevitably going to show up in the way you live your life. Think about the rich man in this parable. There are clues that while he was prosperous on the outside, he was rotting away on the inside. Jesus says he was clothed in purple and fine linen. That's a clue as to his poverty. This man wasn't just rich in the things of this world. (And to be rich—as Abraham, David, and Job were—is not in itself a sin.) But this rich man wanted everybody to know it and pride *is* a sin.

He feasted sumptuously every day. There's another clue. A Jew would hear those words "every day," and think, "Every day he feasted? Even on the Sabbath when God commanded us to give our servants a day of rest?" But this man didn't care about God. He wanted what he wanted. He wanted to eat sumptuously every day even if it meant his servants had to work on the Sabbath. That kind of arrogant disregard for God and for others *is* sin.

There's another clue. Jesus said that Lazarus desired to be fed with the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table, implying that that desire was not being met. He cared not at all for his fellow man, the one starving at his own gate. Selfishness *is* a sin.

Now to look at this man you would think that God favored him. That he was prospering. You would envy him. But on the inside he was rotting away with pride and arrogance and selfishness. When he dies and his gods are taken away from him, what's he left with? Nothing. This man who once had everything now had not even a drop of water to cool his tongue. It turns out that all along he was poorer by far than Lazarus, who used to beg at his gate.

And when denied a drop of water, he begs for something else. He pleads with Abraham to send Lazarus back to warn his brothers. We tend to think miracles will make people believe in Jesus. Christ is risen but most people still don't listen to Him. Jesus just isn't the kind of God people want, risen or not. He's not a god who shares human priorities, who affirms us in all of our choices. He's not a god who tells us everything is okay when it's not. Jesus is not that kind of god. He's a God of truth, a God who calls sinners to repent, who tells us what sin really is. And He calls us to give up the idolatry of our money, our lusts, and ourselves. But that's not the kind of god people want. Even somebody rising from the dead will not convince them. We prefer our gods, gods that *seem* to give us what makes us rich. But things are not always as they seem.

Jesus has come to turn beggars into millionaires. He himself was truly rich. Yet for our sake He became poor. He came to all of us Lazaruses in this world, who are poor in spirit, not to give us a drop of water but to give us the eternal riches of his

kingdom so that we will never thirst again. He came not merely to soothe wounds but to wash us and cleanse us and heal us from the leprosy of sin. He came not to feed us with the crumbs from his table but with the feast of his own body and blood and with the eternal feast of his kingdom. He came to make every beggar at his gate the richest person of all. Jesus is not that rich man who steps over those in need. He is not the man clothed in purple and fine linen who feeds his dogs but not his neighbor. He came for the rich and for the poor to show us our poverty before God. And then to direct our eyes to where true riches can be found—the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ that overflows with the riches of His forgiveness and mercy and life and salvation and joy and hope.

Not that it's easy to believe that all the time. I understand that, especially if you happen to be a Lazarus, who has to carry so much misery along with you in life. And even if you're not that type of person, if you're a Christian, you can expect to carry a cross: You will be hated by the world and the devil; you will be hated as Christ was hated. Or God might send you a struggle, a cross for you to bear, to train you, to discipline you, to draw you closer. And if God doesn't send you a poverty of money, it may be a poverty of health, a poverty of peace, a poverty of companionship. It can be hard in those circumstances to believe that God is for you, that He loves you, that He's saving you. But remember things are not always as they seem.

Lazarus suffered a poverty of money. But *he* was the rich man. Look at the clues from his life. After he dies, the angels bear him home to Abraham's side—Abraham, of whom the Scriptures say that he believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. So it is that all of Abraham's true children are not by biological

descent but by faith. And then here's another clue as to just how rich Lazarus really was. From heaven Abraham tells the rich man, "Between us and you a great chasm has been fixed in order that those who would pass to you may not be able." Now that's an interesting passage. It makes sense that those who are in the torment of Hades would want to cross that chasm to heaven, to be comforted at the side of Abraham. But why would anyone want to cross from heaven the other way, to Hades? Why would Abraham say that, unless perhaps Lazarus himself was ready to do just that, to cross that chasm, to comfort the man who refused to comfort him, to help that man who declined to help him, to take pity on that man who had shown him no pity. Is not this the love of Christ who did exactly that for us? Is this not the love of Christ in which Lazarus trusted that made him the rich one all along? Is this not the love that has been shown to each of us, that Jesus crossed the chasm—the only One who could—to serve those who hated him, to receive those who rejected him, to redeem those who despised him, to raise from the dead those who would kill him. Things are not always what they seem.

And so if you are rich in the things of this world, remember those wise words from St. Paul: "Do not be haughty or set your hopes on the uncertainty of riches," but "be rich in good works, generous and ready to share" (1 Tim 6:17-18). Those will serve as clues that you are also rich in the things of God. If you so happen to be one of those Lazaruses in the world, if you feel you are impoverished in this world for some reason, it's not always going to be that way, but for all those who love Christ and His appearing very soon will come that rest and eternal riches at His right hand. Then we will see who's rich and who's poor, since even now we're rich in Jesus. Amen.

Pastor Brent McGuire
Our Redeemer Lutheran Church