

TRINITY I

St. Luke 16:19-31

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

You know, Pastor Bruss told me this was a stewardship Sunday, and at first glance you could say that, as always, the one year lectionary is there with the win, because this morning's parable from Jesus sounds like more on money, the evils of riches, and concern for the poor. But it's actually about faith and the Word, as stewardship is too. Rich and poor are incidentals. Important incidentals but incidentals nonetheless.

There was a rich man and there was a poor man. It doesn't get more binary than that, does it? The poor man was named Lazarus, the same as Jesus' good friend from Bethany, the brother of Mary and Martha. Jesus' friend was not a poor beggar. He owned a home and lived with his sisters. The Lazarus in this story was poor and begged in the streets. We don't know the name of the rich man, which might seem strange at first, since the Lord who knows and calls us by name doesn't give the rich man a name. He's a kind of generic, faceless stand-in, kind of like the one will end up knocking on the Lord's banquet door only to hear, "I don't know you. Name's not on the list. What's the name again?" And so everyone in town knows the rich man's name. And probably only a few knew Lazarus. Not so with the Lord.

This nameless rich man was clothed in purple and fine lace. The best eats too. He probably had servants to prepare his meals, to set his table and wash the dishes. Meanwhile, while he sat at the table, Lazarus was laid (or dumped) at the end of his driveway by the locked gate, where he could see what he was missing. He would have been happy to be one of the rich man's dogs who licked the crumbs and morsels that fell from that table. Instead, the dogs of the street licked his oozing sores, which was probably more of a ministry than most people were willing to give to him.

So you couldn't have two more polar opposite characters than this rich man with no name and this beggar named Lazarus. If you were to ask the people of Jesus' day which one of these two was "blessed by God" and had God's "favor," they would have said the rich man, as would most, if not all, of our prosperity preachers today. Count your blessings, we say. Well, the rich man had a lot of blessings to count - clothing, shoes, food, drink, house, home - so in the moral calculus of Jesus' day, Lazarus must be the cursed one. Right? Not so with the Lord.

Both men die. Ultimately, death is the great leveler, rich and poor die alike. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to the "bosom of Abraham," which is a Jewish euphemism for "heaven." It is as we sing "Lord, let at last thine angels come. To Abram's bosom bear me home." That's where it comes from. Lord, treat me like Lazarus the beggar and carry me home. So Lazarus, who was carried around all his life and dumped at rich men's gates is now carried by the angels as a son of Abraham.

The rich man also died. Now, I'm sure there was an impressive funeral and lots of dignitaries to make speeches on his behalf and an elaborate burial in an impressive tomb. So much for what we see with our eyes, right? But take the heaven's eye perspective of Jesus and you see a man in torment in the unending fire of Hades. He lived a comfortable life only to die a very uncomfortable death. And his discomfort is amplified by his being able to see Abraham and good old Lazarus at his side. Talk about reversals! The rich man is now the beggar and the beggar is the rich man.

"Father Abraham," he calls out religiously as a child of Abraham. Have mercy on me. The one who had no mercy on the poor beggar at his gate now seeks mercy from the gates of Hades. *"Send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue. I'm burning up."* He never invited Lazarus into his home, much less to his table, nor did he ever go out to Lazarus. But now, all of a sudden, he wants Lazarus' company. In fact, he wants Lazarus to bring him a drink much the way his servants filled his wine glass whenever it was empty. But this is a far deeper thirst.

"Child." Abraham calls him "child," a child of Abraham. *"You received good things in your lifetime and Lazarus bad."* Now things are flipped. He is comforted, and you're in anguish. His discomfort was temporal, as was your comfort. His comfort is eternal, as is your discomfort. And, even if we wanted, we couldn't get to you. Great chasm. Bigger than that chasm between your table and the gate where Lazarus lay.

Then send Lazarus to my brothers. I have five. I don't want them to wind up here. You know They say there are no atheists in fox **holes**, but actually there are. Some atheists are made in fox holes. But there are no atheists in hell. There the awful truth of unbelief and rejection are known. And the consequences of grace rejected are realized. I wonder when the last time was the rich man talked to his five brothers. Or if he talked to them, when was the last time it was about eternal things instead of the stock market. Suddenly he's interested in evangelism to his brothers, and Lazarus is going to be his evangelist. Poor Lazarus. He's finally at rest from his labors in the bosom of Abraham and everyone is ordering him around and making work for him. Now the rich dude, wants to help give him a hand up and give him a job?

"They have Moses and the Prophets, let them hear them." In other words, they have the Word – the Torah and the Prophets. The Writings too. The Word of God. They have everything they need to know to make them wise to salvation. It's all there. Oh, it would answer every question, scratch every itch, unlock the mysteries of life, or give you the secrets to success, but the Scriptures will make you wise to salvation through faith in Christ. Faith comes by hearing, not by seeing, not by touching. Hearing. Let them hear Moses and the Prophets. We don't need to be bugging Lazarus. And you can't. Chasm, remember?

Ah, but if someone comes back from the dead, that will impress them. Probably scare the daylights out of them and repentance into them. Do you ever wonder if Jesus had his tongue firmly planted in cheek when He told this parable? The irony here is incredible because Jesus actually did raise a man named Lazarus from the dead, the guy who lived with his two sisters in Bethany. Jesus went to his funeral and raised him from the dead in full view of a bunch of people who had come to mourn. And you know what happened after that? They plotted to kill Lazarus as well as Jesus. That's how hardened unbelief is. If you won't hear the Word, you

won't believe even if a dead guy gets up to shake your hand. It is all about your ears, not your eyes!

And let's not forget. Jesus rose from the dead, unassisted by man. He was crucified and on the third day rose again from the dead. And the people didn't believe. Even His own disciples doubted. No, let's get it clear: If you won't hear the Word of God through Moses and the Prophets, and let's add the apostles and evangelists, if we plug our ears and harden our hearts and close our minds to the Word, then we're not going to be convinced by a resurrection.

So where does that leave us? Luther said it best at the end of his life, and you've all probably heard this several times I am hoping. We don't know if he actually said these words but they were penned on a small scrap of paper at the nightstand next to his bed. People in Luther's day took great care about their last words and wrote them down in case they were in no shape to speak them. What Luther wrote was: "We are all beggars. This is true."

We are indeed all beggars. We are Lazarus laying at the rich man's gate, no matter how rich we might be in this world. The problem is that most of us, all of us, would rather be the rich man than Lazarus. Who doesn't want nice clothing, a nice home, good food and drink, a decent health plan? No one in their right minds would want to be Lazarus. We avoid Lazarus. If he were parked at the end of our driveways, we'd call the police to have him removed. We admire the rich man. We want to be the rich man. We think we'd be happy and comfortable and at peace if we were the rich man. And maybe in this life, we would be. And that's the danger of riches. For the sake of things temporal, we lose sight of things eternal. That's the danger of leading with your eyes, instead of your ears.

That's why Jesus says, "*Blessed are you who are poor, and woe to those who are rich.*" The poor live in hope, the rich have nothing to hope for. The poor live by grace, the rich live off the interest. That doesn't mean that being rich is a vice and being poor is a virtue. Nor does being poor necessarily commend you to God, though the Lord does keep watch over the poor. Abraham, at whose bosom Lazarus reclined, was a rich man. As was Solomon. And Lydia, who sold the purple goods that the rich man in the parable wore. Being poor doesn't grant you an E-ticket to heaven, nor does being rich put you on the highway to hell. But riches are an easy impediment.

We are, in the end, beggars all. This is true. So where does this put us? Well, dear friends, give freely so that even more can hear Moses and the Prophets. You have nothing to lose, because in Christ you have everything already. You are rich! And fathers, there are no greater riches that you can give your children than Moses and the Prophets too.

Ultimately here, where's Jesus in all this? Well, he's with Lazarus. Jesus was rich in eternal treasures. The Son of God. He became poor, a beggar who borrowed everything – His crib, His donkey, His cross, His tomb. All borrowed. He had no place to lay His head in this world. The Lord of the universe, the eternal Son, took His place at the end of our driveway. A beggar king among beggar citizens. We are all beggars.

Had the rich man dared to look up from his dinner and out his window to his gate, he would have seen something Christ-like. Lazarus. *"I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink."* He would see in the poverty of Lazarus the poverty of his own existence, the poverty of his riches, and the poverty of Christ.

Christ was rich but for our sakes became poor, a Lazarus to this world, despised, rejected, left to die with the dogs. He became poor so that in His poverty you might be rich in eternal treasure. You might be clothed not in fine designer purple but in the royal robes of Jesus' righteousness. You might feast not on the delicacies of this world's table but at the Lamb's table of which His Supper is a foretaste of a feast to come.

In the world's eyes, you might be poor, but not so in the Lord.

In your baptism, you are named and you are known by God and you live your life walking wet in the dew of your baptismal grace.

And you have Moses and the Prophets. You have the apostles and evangelists too. Hear them! They will make you wise to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

Yes, you have the Lord's words of absolution ringing in your ears and here you feast at the table on the Lord's very body and blood.

And you have Jesus risen from the dead. Believe Him and take your place with Lazarus. You know I don't know most of your names, but your Triune God does. How rich you are!

In the name of Jesus. Amen

And now may the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.