

Trinity Lutheran Church
28 September 2025
(Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost)

Luke 16:19-31

19 There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. 20And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, 21who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. 22The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. 23In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. 24He called out, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames. 25But Abraham said, Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. 26Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us. 27He said, Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house— 28for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment. 29Abraham replied, They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them. 30He said, No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent. 31He said to him, If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"

Isn't it great to be outside? It's a little chilly but it's not raining. I hope this setting reminds you that God has created a beautiful world and we are blessed to be a part of it. Having said that today's gospel reading sounds like a real downer. With nature and its beauty all around us do we really want to hear about some rich guy suffering in a place of torment. Yet, like a car wreck that you can't seem to turn away from this story really grabs your imagination...so I'm going to go with it.

I'm sure you've all heard this story before. This rich guy dies and goes to hades and a poor man dies and is now with Abraham in paradise. And this story centers around a conversation the rich guy has with Abraham. I used to think the meaning of this story was pretty straight forward.

I thought the meaning of the story went like this: If you have enough to eat and a roof over your head and feel guilty and ashamed when you see or hear of someone who has less than you, then **do something about it now** before it's too late cause' God's gone-a-get-ya.

I used to think that's what this story meant...until as a young want-to-be pastor I was doing my internship year in Alaska. My supervising pastor thought it would be a good idea for me to teach the 7th grade Sunday School class. It wasn't a good idea. I hadn't a clue how to engage a group of 12 year olds and they reminded me of that fact every time we met. If you know anything about 12 year olds you know that that for them Sunday school is their least favorite activity in the whole world. The only reason they are there is because their parents either forced them or bribed them to go. This was a time before cell phones and the internet...so they just sit there looking glassy eyed and totally bored. But not this time.

After reading this story I asked them, "What do you think this story is trying to tell us?" As usual nobody said a word. Feeling just a little bit frustrated I said, "Look, this is a story about heaven and hell so just for this discussion you have my permission to say the word 'hell' when talking to me about this story."

Wow! It was as if lightening struck right in the middle of the room. Imagine being 12 years old and you've been given permission to say that forbidden word out loud, in church, in front of your friends, on a Sunday morning, and in front of the pastor! I'm telling you, these kids wasted no time opening up and telling me what they thought the story was about...and they used that forbidden word far more often than was necessary.

I'll paraphrase some of their thoughts for you and clean up the language.

One girl said it means only poor people are going to heaven and the rich people go to the other place. She then concluded that heaven must be filled with people from Africa and India because that's where most of the really poor people live.

One of the boys said this parable means we shouldn't help poor people —My jaw hit the ground—from his perspective people who are poor and miserable in this life will live for eternity in paradise. However, if we help them out in this short life it reduces their chances of spending eternity in heaven so we actually do them a favor by leaving them alone. He later told me he didn't believe that was true but that's what the story said.

Another boy said the rich guy was stupid. God doesn't like rich people so what he should have done is spend all his money and just before he dies give all the rest of his money to the church or something. That way he'll die poor and do something good so Jesus will let him into heaven.

Another girl said, "this story tells us God loves us in this life but if you get on God's bad side, after you die and are sent to the really bad place and God won't even lift a finger to help you then.

Now, I have to give these kids credit...they were wrestling with the scripture which is what I asked them to do. It goes without saying, these were not the answers I was hoping to hear. And they certainly are not what I want to leave you with this morning. So let's look again.

The first thing to keep in mind is that this is a parable, a parable, not a factual news report. A parable is a make-believe story that makes a single point and reveals to us something of what God, or his kingdom, is like. A parable often uses exaggerated images—that way it gets the point across and it helps you remember the story. The problem my want-a-be 7th grade theologians had is they didn't take into account the larger context of the gospel but instead focused on the details in the story which caused them to overlook the larger point Jesus was making.

Their mistake was that they assumed God believes rich people are selfish and evil and therefore they need to be punished in the next life. What they failed to see is that throughout the gospel Jesus sometimes hung around some pretty wealthy people. He ate with tax collectors who were among the wealthiest people in his society. Now to be fair tax collectors became rich by exploiting the poor which Jesus despised...and Jesus took them to task because of their unethical behavior—but Jesus did not take them to task because they were rich. Likewise Pharisees also hung around Jesus. Many of them were quite wealthy. Jesus ate with them and invited them to be part of the kingdom. He denounced their hypocrisy but he didn't chastise them for being wealthy. We also know, many of them rejected Jesus and his teachings but Jesus kept the invitation open.

A second thing to consider is that this parable is not about how we get into heaven. This parable doesn't tell us why poor Lazarus ended up in paradise. We automatically assume Lazarus was a good man, a likable chap, who was kind and generous with what little he had. You know, someone we would feel sorry for. But we don't know that. Maybe he was just the opposite, maybe he was a grumpy mean and nasty old man who made bad choices or maybe he was on the street because he was strung out on drugs. We have no idea.

All we do know is that God had mercy on him and carried him to paradise and the rich man wound up in the place of torment.

Just to be very clear, the Bible is clear that we are saved by God's grace and his mercy, that we are justified by faith not by works. In this parable Jesus is not saying that we get to heaven by how we treat other people. Now, how we treat other people is really, really, important...but the point of this parable lies elsewhere.

I've come to think that Luke here is urging his readers to imagine how people lose their way. How we become distracted and lose sight of what is really important in this life. If we see this story in this way then Jesus is warning **us** that **we** can lose **our** way. The issue isn't simply that the man is rich or that he shows no compassion toward Lazarus (though both of these things are true and both are important), but rather the issue is that he **misused** his wealth in such a way that he lost his way. The way he used his wealth prevented him from seeing or relating to Lazarus as a fellow human being. As someone who was also like himself, made in God's image.

Did you notice how the rich man assumes Lazarus will do his bidding even in the hereafter? Even after he dies and is living in hades he never speaks directly to Lazarus but only to Abraham. Even in the afterlife, even after the reversal of fortunes, the rich man still sees Lazarus only as an object, a servant...not as his equal and not even as a fellow human being. "*Abraham*" he cries, "*send Lazarus to bring me water.*" The rich man lacked the ability to see Lazarus, a person in a lower economic class as a human being and he carries that attitude with him over into the next life. The rich man misused his wealth and privileged status to isolate himself from the needs of others and in the process it is **he himself** who has become less of a human being.

Compassion surfaces here and elsewhere as an important value in Luke's gospel. Could it be that not having compassion is a sure sign of being lost? Even more, might Jesus, I mean just might Jesus be warning us to watch out...that riches can blind us and restrain our compassion for others when **we** misuse **our** wealth to insulate ourselves from the need of others? And when we do, it is **we ourselves** who become more isolated and less human.

Perhaps the chasm that separates the rich man and Lazarus in death only echoes the one that separated them in life. Maybe the rich man's torment is the isolation he lived with all of his life because he refused to have compassion for others...and in the after-life he is painfully aware of how miserable that isolation has made him.

If we read the parable this way, we discover another thread in the complex but helpful tapestry Luke weaves about the believer's relationship to money. There is much one can accomplish with wealth, but take care lest your wealth, or your pursuit of it, insulates you from the needs of those around you. If we trust God, then we will take to heart God's injunction to have compassion on those around us, to be vulnerable to each other, to actually see God in the face of our neighbor's need.

Here's another thing. Have you noticed that Jesus talks a lot about money but he never asks for any? He mentions money in more than a third of all his parables and stories recorded in the Bible. He wants us to be aware of our priorities—and then change them—to put people first and our own comfort, yes, even our own piece of mind about our financial future, second.

His concern in this parable is the destructive affect money can have on our relationships with others. This parable causes me to wonder what it would be like for the church to talk about money without asking for any? What if we left it up to God's Holy Spirit to urge church members to give generously because in their struggle to live the gospel it only makes sense to help others through the ministries that the church provides.

It seems to me that part of what is at stake in this parable is the strong link between our well-being and that of others. If we cannot feel compassion for others we have lost something that is deeply and genuinely both human and divine. In time, the wealth that has numbed us to the need of our neighbor deludes us into imagining that we ourselves have no need for God. That we are sufficient unto ourselves. Folks, when you or I reach that point, we are, indeed, as lost as the rich man in today's parable.

But the reverse is also true -- when we become more responsive to the hurts, hopes, and needs of others — especially those who are not at all like us — we become more aware of our own humanity, of our own longings and needs and thereby begin to appreciate the one who took on our need, our humanity, our lot and our life, all in order to show us God's profound love for each one of us.

And when we do have compassion for others God reveals to us how much we really do need each other. For without the other we ourselves are not whole, not fully human. We are called to trust that God will provide for us and when we trust God we discover our true selves in reaching out to our neighbor in need.

Oh, and one last thing. Did you notice that this story began with the rich man eating his dinner alone. But, oh no, not here! Or worship service continues with all of us eating together...at Lord's table and a few minutes later at a picnic table. No one is alone. No one is left out. It matters not if you're rich or poor, young or old, male or female, gay or straight, someone who has worked hard this week or someone who has hardly worked at all. None of those things matter. The only thing that matters is that our Lord has invited you, yes you, me, and all of us, to his table. So come! Enjoy! You are welcome here! AMEN.