

Sermon for September 29, 2019 – “Rich Man? Poor Man?”

26th Sunday in OT, Year C – Text(s): Luke 16:19-31

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Is anyone here worried? Did anyone else take a moment to think as we heard this parable? Did anyone say to themselves, ‘Am I like the rich man and I don’t know it? Will I end up in Hell because I have a house, a car and a retirement portfolio?’. I hope not but these are fair and honest questions.

Last week there was confusion about the Master who praises his dishonest manager. But this week things are clear. The rich man is rewarded in this life and punished in the next. And this Lazarus, different from the man whom Jesus raised from the dead, this poor man living in front of the rich man’s house was punished in this life and rewarded in the next.

Well, let’s think about this. How much makes you rich? Well, if your annual salary is \$40,000 a year you’re in the top 5 percent of the world’s richest people. If you make \$60,000 a year you’re in the top 1% of the world’s richest people. These can be staggering figures. If this parable’s really about the amount in your bank account then most of us are in deep trouble. And while this parable’s familiar to us we cannot simply reduce it to its surface meaning. When Jesus tells a story, as we know, there’s always more to it than what’s on the surface. The rich man’s more than just a rich person. He is the epitome of wealth and excess. He wears the clothes of kings. He feasts each day like he’s at the royal court. He is a caricature more than real person. And Lazarus, he’s the poorest most pathetic soul you’ve ever seen; starving at the rich man’s gate and too weak to move. Diseased and unclean. He’s so pitiful that even the street dogs take mercy on him. Yet, something strange happens when Lazarus dies. For you see, normally an unclean sinner like Lazarus wouldn’t be taken to heaven, at least according to the religious understanding of his day. The poor and the unclean are unrighteous and while they’re to be cared for in this world they’re excluded from the next. But when Lazarus dies he’s carried into heaven by angels similar to Elijah or Moses, heroes of the Jewish people to this day. Heaven was reserved for only the most favored of God. And something even stranger happens when the rich man dies. Most people in Jesus’ day didn’t believe in an afterlife for the average person. The place you went to when you died was Sheol, the ground, the grave. But the rich man isn’t just buried. He goes to Hades. And Hades isn’t just some generic Hell. No, the rich man winds up in **Greek Hell**. **Gentile Hell**. Being buried wasn’t bad enough in the parable he had to go to the hell of another religion. And here’s where we get to see that this **isn’t** about, what we need to do to get in heaven. Even in Hades, the rich man still has no clue what’s going on. He cries out to Abraham from gentile hell, and even from hell he maintains his superior attitude. As if poor Lazarus hasn’t suffered enough the rich man says to Abraham, “Send that poor Lazarus fellow down with a drop of water.” Here he is in hell acting like a snooty hotel guest ordering room service. And when Abraham says no the rich man tries again. He orders a message to his brothers. Abraham still refuses.

The rich man is the epitome of selfishness. He doesn’t care for the poor on his doorstep as religious law dictates. He dresses like a king and eats like a king. And even when he’s in Gentile hell he doesn’t give up on his sense of entitlement.

The chasm that's been set between Abraham and the rich man is the chasm of self-righteousness. The chasm of selfishness that we create for ourselves so often keeps us from seeing the world around us. The rich man might be an exaggeration and Lazarus might be an extreme example but the reality of these feelings and emotions about others, about ourselves, remains the same. Often we get stuck inside ourselves. We simply cannot see beyond what we're owed, what we believe we deserve and what injustices have been done to us. There are different names for this. The Westminster Handbook to Reformed Theology, the theology to which Presbyterians subscribe, calls it original sin. So does Catholicism. Others, less comfortable with that term call it human nature or the human condition. As one theologian put it, we're curved in on ourselves. We try to be like God. We try to save ourselves. And in the end, we all fall short, we all fail, and we all die.

It's the last few words of the parable that cue us into what Jesus is talking about today, "**Neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.**" And you've got to love the irony of this as it is coming from Jesus. He knows that even when He rises from the dead there will be those among the disciples who won't be convinced. The rich man wants Lazarus, the ghost, to go to warn his brothers of their fate so that they can save themselves. But Jesus isn't talking about Lazarus the ghost, as if a ghost could save us or that we would in any way, shape or form save ourselves. No – it's God who saves us; specifically it's Christ, God in the flesh, who saves us. Christ the child of peasants. Christ the itinerant rabbi. Christ killed as a common criminal.

The rich man is trying to save himself while Lazarus is dead to the world. So, these two aren't so much actual, real people as they are reminders who we are. And who are we? We're real people, in need of real salvation. And it's God who is giving up all power and might emptying Himself, as Paul puts it, to become like us. Christ is born into the muddy, dirty places in which we live, the places of self-indulgence, the chasms of superior attitudes, the gates of self-pity and death. And it's in **these** places where God comes near to us.

Whether we're rich or poor, entitled or humble, in a mansion or on the street, God's turning death into life regardless. God's licking our wounds of suffering and sin. God's loving us even when we don't deserve to be loved. And God's doing this whether we realize it or not, whether we recognize it or not. God's acting in the world no matter what we're doing. God's acting in the world in spite of what we're doing. God's making the dead alive even if we're too busy to notice. And God isn't swayed by our righteousness or by our **un**righteousness. God acts out of love. God comes near enough to touch us because we belong to God.

The world is so much more grey, so much more complicated than the story of the rich man and Lazarus might – at first glance – seem. Which I think makes it so perfect having kicked off Stewardship season last week doing so, a few months **earlier** than usual. I say that because we're all too rich to see others around us and because we're all too poor to do anything to save ourselves. But, this parable isn't about condemning the rich nor is about the value of being poor. This parable is about the cross. Then again, aren't **all** parables ultimately about the cross? If we're thinking and talking about them correctly – yes. The cross stands as the place where new life begins in the most powerful symbol of death. The cross is where God empties Himself of all power and might to take on human flesh. The cross is where God dies. Like us.

The cross is where God hides in plain sight, where God turns the world on its head and where God reminds us all that it is **God alone** who saves us.

I'm reminded of a joke that I'm pretty sure you've heard me tell, but which I'm going to tell again anyway because it contains a powerful truth and teaches an equally powerful lesson. There once was a rich man who was near death. He was very grieved because he'd worked so hard for his money and wanted to be able to take it with him to heaven. So he began to pray that he might be able to take some of his wealth with him. An angel heard his plea and appeared to him. "Sorry," he said, "but you can't take your wealth with you." The man begged the angel to speak to God to see if He might bend the rules. The angel did so while the man continued to pray that his wealth could follow him. The angel reappeared and informed the man that God had decided to allow him to take one suitcase with him. Overjoyed, the man gathered his largest suitcase filled it with pure gold bars and placed it beside his bed. Soon afterward, he died and showed up at the gates of heaven. An angel greeted him. Seeing the suitcase, the angel said, "Hold on, you can't bring that in here!" The man explained to the angel that he had permission and asked him to verify his story with God. Sure enough, the angel checked it out, came back and said, "You're right. You're allowed one carry-on bag, but I'm supposed to check its contents before letting it through." The angel opened the suitcase then looked at the man and said, "You brought pavement?"

Brothers and sisters, here's the thing, will our riches will keep us out of heaven? Yes. Of course they will if we think that's what it takes to get us in! Folks, we can't buy our way in no matter how much pavement we have. Will being poor make us worthy of salvation? No. Of course not. We cannot save ourselves. God alone saves.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.