

Preaching Copy: Luke 16:25-31 "Who Is Outside Your Gate?"

16th Sunday @ Pentecost – Proper 21

Sunday, September 25th, 2022

Text: Luke 16:25-31

²⁵ But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. ²⁶ And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.' ²⁷ And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house---²⁸ for I have five brothers---so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' ²⁹ But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' ³⁰ And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' ³¹ He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'"

Exegetical Statement (the text's context)

Jesus tells this parable in connection with His previous parables addressing the Pharisees disapproval of His reaching out in fellowship with those they considered sinners unworthy of God's kingdom. He taught through three parables about how important each and every lost sinner is to the Father who rejoices when one lost soul repents. Then in the Parable of the Dishonest Manager Jesus teaches how worldly wealth should serve the sharing of the righteous eternal wealth of the Gospel, instead of allowing it to become our God. Here He tells a parable that describes the temporal and eternal condition of those who make wealth their god instead of a means to show His love. An unnamed man is described wearing the finest apparel and daily enjoying the wealth God gave him with sumptuous banquets fit for a wedding celebration. Outside his gate is a poor destitute beggar covered not in fine apparel but sores, who longs for even the scraps that fall from the Rich Man's table, but doesn't even receive that. When death comes to both men the situation is reversed. Lazarus, as one who has faith is carried by God's angels to heaven where he has all his needs provided for. But in eternal hell the Rich Man now is experiencing torment that lasts forever. He still sees Lazarus as one beneath him, desiring he come serve him refreshment. But the chasm between heaven and hell will not allow anyone to cross. The Rich Man finally shows concern for someone else, that his brothers don't wind up here in torment. But no one is going to return with a personal witness to them, they have all they need with Scripture. As do we, with the testimony of the resurrected Christ Jesus.

Focus Statement:

Jesus is the One who has come back from the dead. His Gospel testimony in Scripture is the only thing that will turn the tide for us to change our eternal destination from torment to the extravagant eternal messianic banquet. His testimony includes His powerful love that through the Spirit moves us to share with those at our gate, so that His Gospel message might save them too.

Function Statement:

Why it's important to know:

All of us are like the Rich Man, given ample blessings that we could personally share with a needy person at our gate, yet we keep it for ourselves. We all deserve to be in torment where the Rich Man is. Yet we are powerless to bridge the gap between heaven and hell

What the hearer should do as a result:

Be warned that making wealth your god is your ticket to eternal torment. But faith in Christ shows us those in need at our gate and moves us to compassionate giving

Subject Sentence: Call to Share the Gospel with Those Outside the Gate

Introduction

Our Gospel Lesson should be a story that is familiar to you. It's one of those accounts that is particular to Luke's Gospel. Most Biblical Scholars consider it to be a parable, even though neither Luke nor Jesus identifies it as such. Many, including myself, have used it as Jesus' teaching on what happens when we die, and there is some usefulness in that. But it needs to be read and understood in context. It relates back to our Gospel Lesson two weeks ago. **Luke 15:1-2** ¹ **Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him.** ² **And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."** Then Jesus tells three parables to explain why He eats and draws near these people, because to Himself and His Father these are precious, like one lost sheep from the ninety-nine, like one lost gold coin out of ten, and like one lost Prodigal Son who was lost and is welcomed back through the grace and mercy of his father. Then, just preceding our reading today, we hear Jesus tell the parable we read last week of the Dishonest Manager who uses wealth he was given to manage to show grace and mercy to those who owed a huge debt, just as we as Christians should use wealth that has been given by God to show grace and mercy to those around us, especially the gift of eternal value: the Gospel. Jesus presents this story like a parable, a story about no one in particular, just a certain man. But the message He is teaching is definitely aimed at particular individuals in Jesus audience as he was telling it. And beyond that, through the power of the Spirit working in God's Word, it's aimed at you and me too.

The Parable and Who It is Aimed At

Jesus tells us of two men: a Rich Man, and a poor destitute man named Lazarus. They are presented to us as polar opposites of life in this world. The Rich Man has been extremely blessed with wealth. We can see this in the fact that he dresses in fine purple linen. This is the most expensive kind of clothing; worn by rulers and kings and the very wealthy. He not only dresses in opulence but lives the same way. He has a habit of daily throwing extravagant dinner parties, the kind that would normally be reserved for a wedding celebration. Yet he can afford to and makes this his daily ritual. These are the kind of banquets that would not be enjoyed alone, but in the company of favored friends and acquaintances. He is one who loves his extravagant lifestyle. This Rich Man would be very familiar to the Pharisees since Jesus described this character with them in mind, as we read their reaction to Jesus' summary of last week's lesson in **Luke 16:13-14** ¹³ **No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.** ¹⁴ **The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him.**

And then there is Lazarus, a poor destitute beggar whose life situation is the polar opposite from the Rich Man. Instead of fine purple linen his body is covered in sores. Instead of sitting and enjoying all the food of an extravagant banquet he is left outside the gate with nothing. He longs for even the crumbs that fall from the Rich Man's table, but not even these come his way. It's not because the Rich Man is unaware of him or didn't see his need. Lazarus was placed at his gate because the Rich Man was someone in the position to show mercy. The Rich Man would've seen him every time he left the house. We see later on that the Rich Man actually knows his name. The only creature that showed any care or compassion for Lazarus were the dogs that roamed about. It is only they that came and cared for his sores as best they could, just as they would've licked their own wounds. Lazarus in this parable is meant to bring to mind all those the Pharisees had cast out of their midst, all those sinners they accused Jesus of eating with, all those they declared to be unworthy to be taken care of physically or spiritually.

Then comes the great leveler: death. It comes to both men. And at death we see a great reversal of fortunes for these two men. Lazarus is no longer outside the gate suffering want and need. At death God sends His angels to carry his soul to be in His presence forever. He finds himself in the bosom of Abraham, which is another way of saying "in Abraham's intimate presence. And because Abraham is the one whom God declared to be in right standing with Him because of his faith in God's promises, that tells us that Lazarus is where all those who have saving faith wind up at death, in the presence of God Himself. Lazarus is no longer on the outside wishing he could have scraps from the banquet table. He has been given a seat at the Messianic banquet that will begin on the Last Day. The banquet that will make the Rich Man's banquets pale by comparison: all you could ever want or need, the best of the best. And it lasts forever.

And what of the Rich Man? His days of feasting and banqueting are over. He finds himself cast into a place far worse than Lazarus' place outside the gate. His torment is far worse than what Lazarus dealt with even considering his open sores. The Rich Man is facing eternal torment that cannot be escaped, even by death. There will be no end. And what happens when he calls out and seeks relief? He looks to "Father Abraham" the patriarch who the Rich Man believed, because he was a flesh and blood descendant, was his own personal ticket to that Messianic Banquet. But genealogy was not the ticket he hoped it would be. Suffering in intense physical, emotional, and spiritual pain the Rich Man cries out to have Lazarus come serve him a drink of cold water. Lazarus, the man whom he barely noticed in life, and even now considers only to have the status of a slave to serve him. But Lazarus is not there to be a lowly slave of this Rich Man.

This is the "Great Reversal" that both men experience at death. In life the Rich Man had extreme comfort, while Lazarus suffered. Now Lazarus enjoys comfort and peace far beyond what the Rich Man ever experienced in this life. And the Rich Man must endure eternal suffering beyond what Lazarus ever experienced.

And besides that, there is no crossing over from heaven to hell, or hell to heaven. The chasm, the divide is too great. And it is fixed in place by God so that no one can cross. The Rich Man must suffer on his own with no relief coming. It is the eternal reward he earned for himself

It's at this realization that he finally turns to consider someone else besides himself, his five brothers. He realizes that given their heart attitude and lack of faith their eternal destination will be the same as his. But his plea to send Lazarus back to the land of the living as a messenger boy is also met with a negative answer. That is no longer Lazarus' vocation. He will not be made to leave his seat at the eternal messianic banquet before it starts. In fact, there is no need to send anyone back with a personal testimony about heaven and hell. Those five brothers, as well as the rest of the world have the only testimony that is needed: Holy Scripture. If that testimony is disregarded, then not even an appearance of someone back from the dead can help them.

What Jesus Isn't Saying, And What He Is

So, what is Jesus trying to say to these Pharisees, His Disciples, and to us through this parable? And what is He not saying through it?

First of all, what He is not saying. Jesus did not tell this with the purpose of answering all our questions about what happens when we die. And since it is a parable, we should be very careful not to make those elements that set the scene, the window dressing, take center stage and distort our view. There are elements here that simply work for the sake of bringing forth the message He wants them and us to take home. One of these window dressing details is the dialog between the Rich Man and Abraham, and Abraham being able to see and know what the Rich Man is suffering. Abraham speaks in place of the voice of God, who does know what eternal suffering is like, since His Son suffered that on the cross for you and for me. You notice in the parable that there is no indication that Lazarus sees or hears or notices the Rich Man and His suffering. That is in keeping with our Savior's promise that all tears will be wiped away from our eyes. In eternal hell no one will be able to communicate with those in heaven, or on earth. And those in eternal life will be too busy with the joy of paradise to care about those suffering in hell.

So, what is Jesus trying to teach them and us? Once we reach our eternal destination there will be no switching sides. The chasm has been fixed. It is eternally deep, and no one can cross from one side to another. Those destined for eternal hell will be there forever with no chance of escape. And those souls in God's presence destined for eternal paradise cannot and will not fall from grace.

Therefore, what determines our eternal destination? Well, being like the Rich Man who worships himself and his wealth in exclusion of anything else will definitely send you to eternal hell. But just being wealthy won't necessarily do that. And for the record, being a destitute beggar, or even one who lives day to day barely making ends meet won't assure that your soul will be taken by the angels to be where Lazarus is. The real fact of the matter is we are born with the same heart problem as the Rich Man. We are all born with sinful selfish hearts that don't want to share what we've been blessed with, especially with those we consider to be outcasts like the Rich Man did Lazarus. We were born sinners who were destined to live forever on the wrong side of that chasm, destined to spend our eternity suffering there.

But along came Jesus. He was born and lived His life on the other side, the side of love for the Heavenly Father and true love for His fellow man. He is the one who always saw that the gifts and blessings He was given were for others. And He used them to heal and restore all those like Lazarus who were suffering physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Yet His destiny was not to go be with Lazarus, but through His suffering and death be sent to that very place of torment where the Rich Man was. He chose to suffer on the cross the hell that all mankind deserves. And He did that out of the greatest love for all, for Lazarus, for the Pharisees, for you and for me. So that through His suffering, death, and resurrection He might forever change our eternal future. Lazarus at his death was carried to God's presence for no other reason than faith, the faith that trusted the Lord's promise of the Savior to come, who whose sacrifice would cancel all the sins that would exclude him from such a wondrous place. That faith is the same reason that you and I will be carried to God's presence, to Jesus' presence. We go there only because of our faith that Jesus did all that was necessary to make us eternally right with God.

What Are We To Do With This

Why was the Rich Man sent to eternal suffering, especially considering that our lives often resemble his selfishness in ways we might not like to admit? Simply because he refused the free gift of faith. And it showed that in how he lived out his life, in unrepentant sin, continuing to worship his gods of himself and his wealth through how he lived his life right up until the day he died. There are many real-life Rich Men in our world. Not all of them are what you would call wealthy. Many are as poor and needy as Lazarus. But all of them lack the eternal wealth that is valuable enough to save any man: the faith given in the Gospel Message that trusts in Christ and Christ alone for salvation from that place of torment.

That gift of faith changes the hearts and minds of all who receive it, including yours and mine. It's a gift that comes with the Holy Spirit, who is at work to open our eyes to the need around us, to those whom the Lord places outside our gate, in our path, those who are in want and in need physically, emotionally, and spiritually. They are the ones who come to Franklin Mission looking for crumbs from the table, and instead receive a place at the diner's table. It's a place where they can experience the fellowship and friendship that we share as believers. It's a place where the Gospel can be shared, the Scripture that the Holy Spirit works through in order to bring them to the eternal banquet table with Lazarus on the Last Day. Who else might we find outside our gate? Those who walk through our parking lot who need someone to just say hello to, or those on the playground with children, who need someone, maybe you, to stop and talk with for a few minutes, to begin a conversation that might lead to an invitation to join us for fellowship activities as well as worship. And there are others in your life that the Lord plants at your gate, divine appointments where you all of a sudden find yourself in a conversation that can lead to the sharing of something special. In all of these interactions we look for the opportunity to share that message from Scripture that can convict someone of their sin and open the eyes of faith to the Savior whose death and resurrection will save them from eternal suffering too.

Conclusion

They need to hear that message from Moses and the prophets, the message of Scripture, the message of Law and Gospel, the message that Jesus has been preaching to the Pharisees and to us. We need to hear it too. We need to be shown how much we resemble the Rich Man. We need to hear that message from the One who suffered in torment for us and speaks to us through His Spirit so that we might repent, so that we might change our hearts and minds and actions, so that we might begin to see and share some of what He has given us to bless those He puts at our gate. The Rich Man wanted someone to carry a warning message to his brothers. Jesus is not sending anyone back from the dead to do that. He rose again to empower you and I, His Church, to carry the saving message of His Gospel to all those whose hearts are like the Rich Man, so they too might repent and be saved before it's too late. How inspiring it is to think of someone like Lazarus who was saved from suffering in this world for the eternal banquet to come. How might you be used by the Spirit to change the eternal destination of one like the Rich Man? How thankful are you that Jesus has done that in your life? May you, like Lazarus, be confirmed in that saving faith unto life everlasting. Amen