

Sermon for Trinity 1 - Luke 16:19-31

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

“The poor man [Lazarus] died and was carried by angels to Abraham’s bosom. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side.” In the story of the rich man and poor Lazarus, you are apt to cheer for divine retribution: the rich become poor and the poor become rich. Perhaps you imagine a holy “karma” of Lazarus putting in time in earthly slums to earn the luxury suite in heaven, while the rich man who had every pleasure on earth, suffered every torment in hell. But what was it that sent the rich man to torment, and what was it that sent angels to carry poor Lazarus to heaven?

Let’s make the proper distinction: the poor man doesn’t come to heaven because he is poor. The rich man doesn’t go to hell because he is rich. The old man of our flesh seeks to distort wealth and need. Poverty must lead to despair. Riches must lead to satisfaction apart from the Lord and His sacred gifts. Don’t make that mistake. Poverty of itself is not by nature something good. Wealth in and of itself is not something evil. St. Paul sums up both conditions in one profound sentence: “... I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.” He counted poverty a precious thing. In the same way, He counted riches a blessing to be shared. Many Old Testament characters handled riches well, such as Abraham and David. Job brings the picture full circle.

Look at the life of the rich man in today’s parable. It’s easy to despise him- never giving a hoot about poor Lazarus who sat at his gate begging for scraps while dogs licked his sores. But the people of that day may have not despised the rich man. He was a prominent person in the community. Perhaps his business fueled the economy. Those around him likely admired, respected and loved him. He decked himself in only the finest royal clothing. He feasted sumptuously. He could have been considered by all to be a moral example of pure virtue. Or was it vice? What the Lord calls murder, the rich man calls, “the results of a dog-eat-dog world.” What the Lord calls adultery, the rich man calls, “getting the love I deserve.” What the Lord calls arrogance, the rich man calls self esteem. What the Lord calls anger and envy, the rich man calls the drive to succeed. What the Lord calls self-indulgence, the rich man calls being prudent and resourceful. What the Lord calls greed, the rich man calls smart and careful stewardship. Finally, there are no more sinners in the world! Right!!

Look again at the other man: poor Lazarus lies before this man’s gate. He’s lived a life that was far from perfect. The dog-licked sores that cover his body are but a small manifestation of the sins that stain and pollute his soul. No one attends to him, even at his dying breath. “Wages of sin is death.” But you would be gravely mistaken if you thought his life ended there. His life spans far beyond this transitory life. Lazarus knows that while his sin is great, his Savior is even greater. He trusts the Word of God. He trusts Moses and the Prophets. He knows that the Mighty God will rescue him and all people from their enemies.

He knows that the Good Shepherd will graciously lead him and all the sheep through this valley of sorrow to the verdant pastures of Heaven. Lazarus knows that the Suffering Servant “was wounded for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His stripes we are healed ... and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.” He knows that an Offspring will come from Abraham who will be the shield and reward for he and all people. Lazarus possesses the same faith of Abraham: “... he believed the Lord, and He counted it to him as righteousness.”

No one attended poor Lazarus on earth. How badly this man was treated here, having no one to take care of him! But upon the moment of his death, not one, but a myriad of angels attend to him and carry His soul to Abraham’s bosom. This place was more than the pectorals of a previous patriarch. Abraham’s bosom was the Ark of the Christian Church, the very House of God. Here, faith is counted as righteousness. The loving angels carried Lazarus into heaven and placed him next to Abraham at the feast of Paradise. In the same way, beloved St. John was placed next to Christ at the Last Supper, enjoying rest and comfort, and the most blessed companionship and affection. Every time we celebrate the Holy Communion of the Body and Blood of Jesus, there is a spot reserved for you at this blessed feast of rest and comfort with your Living Savior.

And your Savior lives today. He does not speak through dead men. This is what the rich man hoped for his brothers when he said: “No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.” Even if all the dead should rise and preach, that still would do no good. The Living God has established His living apostolic office of the Holy Ministry. And what comfort that is to us! The Lord has kept His promise to be with His church, even to the end of the age. This is an office that goes beyond the lives of Pastor Arnold or Pastor Froiland. If we love and believe the Word preached by John the Baptist, Peter and Paul, and all pastors faithful to that word; If we highly esteem our baptism because it is God’s sacrament given by Him; If we believe the words of absolution spoken by the pastor; If we receive that Incarnate Word in the Lord’s Supper, then, Dearly Beloved, we stand on sure and firm ground. The Lord has forbidden the dead to preach, but has spoken His Living Word to dead men, so that those who are dead in their sins will live. Here is the righteousness of Abraham. Here is the trust of Lazarus.

Lazarus’ last prayer can be summed up in the final stanza of Martin Schalling’s hymn, “Lord, Thee I Love with all My Heart.” You would do well to make this prayer yours in living and dying. “Lord, let at last Thine angels come, to Abr’ham’s bosom bear me home, that I may die unfearing; and in its narrow chamber keep my body safe in peaceful sleep until Thy reappearing. And then from death awaken me, that these mine eyes with joy may see, O Son of God, Thy glorious face, my Savior and my fount of grace. Lord Jesus Christ, my prayer attend, my prayer attend, and I will praise Thee without end.” Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠