

## Sermon for Trinity 1 – Luke 16:19-31

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

What are you living for? What are you looking for? In what does your trust rely? The approaches of two men are presented to us today to help us answer these questions. First, there was an unnamed rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen, which was the most expensive clothing of that day. He also feasted sumptuously every day. Next, there was a poor man named Lazarus who sat at this rich man's gate. He was covered in sores, and dogs licked those sores. He desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table.

In the course of time, both men died. The rich man was buried and went to Hades or hell. Lazarus was carried to Abraham's side, which means heaven. Abraham said to the rich man, "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." So is it that simple? Rich people go to hell and poor people go to heaven? Certainly not! Take the case of Abraham himself: he had wealth beyond many of his time: flocks, herds, servants, gold, silver, you name it. He had enough money to arm 318 men to rescue his nephew Lot. Abraham was of such a high status that he would negotiate with kings directly. But all his wealth was meaningless compared to the free righteousness that God gave him. He brought nothing into this world. But God plucked Abraham from idol worship to be redeemed by the very Seed that would come from his loins.

Every gift of God can become a curse, and every curse can become a blessing. It all depends on how the curse or the blessing is received: namely, is it received in faith or in disbelief? So the question really becomes: When is wealth a curse? When is poverty and hardship a blessing?

Great wealth or lack of possessions, take your pick. The devil can use either one to consume our hearts and minds. We don't have enough. We are blessed, but we want more. We focus on what we don't have, instead of receiving in thanksgiving all that God has given us. But the thing about idols and obsessions is that God has a tendency to grind them to bits. He tolerates no rivals!

King Solomon, who was also no stranger to wealth, wrote that, "There is nothing new under the sun" and "All is vanity." The dangers of wealth are not new either. It has always been important to recognize them. And it is most especially important in our day and in this country. America is the land of opportunity. We spend more money in one year on entertainment than most people in the world spend on food. Have we not also been deceived into thinking that we can create heaven on earth through expensive things?

What about the rich man in our Gospel? Notice that there's nothing particularly bad said about him. This is important to realize. We don't find that he's accused of dishonesty or cheating. He's not called merciless. He doesn't (at least in an outward way) despise God's Word. He probably even claimed he believed in God. There's nothing preventing us from thinking that he was an upright and well-respected citizen, a veritable picture of morality – admired by his community and the world. Perhaps he even sent his leftover food to help the poor – after all, why else would Lazarus desire fell from the rich man's table if he couldn't have it in the first place?

So what's the problem?

The rich man lived happily and feasted lavishly every day. Every day. What did he do on Monday? Feasted lavishly. What about Tuesday? Feasted lavishly. What about the rest of

the days of the week? Feasted lavishly. What about the Sabbath day? Feasted lavishly. For the rich man, there was no day or time for hearing God's word and receiving His gifts! The Lord had no real place in his life. And what was this man's name again? How was he called? His name isn't mentioned. Christ isn't known to him. Therefore, he isn't known to Christ, either. So he died and was buried and woke up in hell. In the end, he got just what he wanted: separation from God in this life, which necessitated separation from God in eternity!

So the problem is that if our trust isn't in God alone, it will be in something else. The rich man didn't want to give up any of his fancy clothes, sumptuous food, or wealth. To him, they were his safety net. Without them, he felt worried, anxious, and in danger. Do you ever feel that way about the material blessings you have? The blessing of material wealth became a curse to him because he received it in unbelief toward God. He kept his wealth close ... so close that it became a millstone that hung around his neck and dragged him straight down to hell.

Lazarus, on the other hand, lived a life we would consider to be empty of blessings. Illness, hunger, nakedness. No one cared for him when he was sick. He survived on table scraps. He had no home to go to at night. It's doubtful that any of us has ever lived like Lazarus. But Lazarus received this poverty in faith as blessing from the Lord. And so Lazarus actually is the rich man in the parable. He knew his true wealth was in God and in none other. We get some hint about this from his name: Lazarus means, "God helps." He lived by God's help: Lazarus heard God's word of forgiveness and received the Lord's peace. We'd all be blessed to die with nothing more than that, with nothing more than Jesus. Why Jesus? Foxes have holes and birds have their nests, but the Son of Man had no place to lay His head. In His last hours, He was even forsaken by God on the cross – and He did it for you, so that you will never be forsaken.

Both the rich man and Lazarus had Moses and the Prophets. We also have them and even more: we have the evangelists and the apostles as well! In these Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, we find the Kingdom of God. And it's a Kingdom unlike any in this world. In fact, in this world God's Kingdom looks upside down and backwards: If you are rich, look to the cross and humble yourself and like Abraham admit and confess that you really are poor – that you brought nothing into this world and will take nothing out of it. Through faith in Christ, you will become meek, thankful, and merciful.

And if you are like poor Lazarus – suffering from hunger, or poverty, hardship or loneliness: then know that you are rich. Know that your Father in heaven knows your every need even before you ask him in prayer. Know that the kingdom of God is yours. Behold the cross of Christ: see how God loves you. For God Himself in the flesh saw fit to bear all your hardships on the cross. Though faith in Him, you will become patient, devoted, and confident.

Indeed, to you, rich and poor alike: the Lord has dealt bountifully with you: He gave His life on the cross that you might live. He has not forgotten you, but called you by name in Holy Baptism. He does not hide his face, but reveals His glory in His Body and Blood for you – the truest riches on earth that can never pass away. Though you have sinned against Him, He heals your soul because He is the propitiation for your sins. He never forgets you, but delivers you from all trouble. And at the resurrection of the dead, get ready – because His angels are waiting to carry you home. Amen.

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

*This sermon was inspired in part by a sermon by the Rev. H.R. Curtis, pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church, Worden, IL and Zion Lutheran Church, Carpenter, IL. and by a sermon by the Rev. U.V. Koren published in U.V. Koren's Works, Vol. 1, Lutheran Synod Book Company, 2013, p. 271-6*