

The First Sunday after Trinity
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✧ Jesu juva ✧

RICH BUT POOR, POOR BUT RICH

Luke 16:19-31; I John 4:16-21; Genesis 15:1-6

Grace, Mercy and Peace be unto you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

The opening line of one of the Church's earliest catechisms, a second century document called *The Didache*, says: "There are two ways, the way of life and the way of death, and there is a great difference between the two ways." Today we see just how great a difference there is between the way of life and the way of death in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. At the end of this earthly life, one way leads to the comforts of Abraham's bosom and eternal life with Christ, while the other leads to the eternal torments of Hell. Needless to say, it is of paramount importance that you both understand the difference between these two ways and also that you keep to the way of life.

So what is the essential difference between them? We can see the difference in the way the parable describes the life of the rich man and his dealings with the beggar Lazarus. So is it just a story about wealth and poverty and the obligation of the wealthy to help the poor? Is money the main problem in this story? No, the main issues in the story are not about being rich and being poor. Certainly we know that according to God's Law, those with wealth should help those who do not have enough. St. Paul says concerning the wealthy: "Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life." Jesus, also says: "He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise" (Luke 3:11); and: "Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away" (Matthew 5:42). So there should be no question that our Lord commands charity to those in need from those who have an abundance. This the rich man failed to do. But his lack of charity is not the main problem, just a symptom of it.

While this is a story about wealth and poverty, it is so in the way that perhaps most people do not think of these things. Riches are not the problem, for there is nothing wrong with being rich. There are plenty of people in the Bible whom God blessed with great riches and yet who are held up as examples of faithfulness. Abraham was a wealthy man. He had a huge household of servants and workers, so many people in his care and employ that he could literally field an army for battle (and did!). Moses reports very simply in Genesis 13 (:2) that "Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold." And yet Jesus says in this parable that Abraham is in heaven. Though shown by the Scriptures to be a man who sinned in various and sometimes serious ways, he is also the icon of faithfulness and held up as an example for us to emulate. So riches themselves cannot be the issue.

Moreover, there is nothing particularly salvific about poverty. Proverbs 22:2 says: "The rich and the poor have this in common, the Lord is the maker of them all." The poor are not better in God's sight because they are poor. And poverty does not necessarily lead to faith. I have known very wealthy people who are exemplary in their faith. And I have known poor people who claim to be Christians, yet live as if they were heathens, and who put no trust in the Lord, but rather blame God for their unfortunate state. And so Lazarus does not get to heaven in this story just because he was poor.

Rather this issue is one of faith and trust. Here we see the real difference between the rich man and Lazarus. We are not actually told anything about Lazarus' faith, but seeing that he ends up in heaven, we can assume that he put his trust in the mercy of Christ. What else did he have to trust after all? The rich man would not help him. There was no social security to fall back on. There was no welfare system. His fellow man had failed him and so his only hope and helper was God.

We have abundant evidence, however, concerning the rich man and his lack of faith. Look at all that he has. Jesus says that he, "was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day." He lives as if he were royalty. He lacks for nothing at all, has an abundance of the things of this life. And yet he determines that he has nothing to give to the poor, dying beggar that sits at his gates. Why is that? Because he loved his riches and did not wish to part with them, even for the sake of helping someone in dire need. His riches and the things they bought for him were more important to him than the life of his fellow man. He loved and trusted this wealth. Wealth was what brought him his good life.

But what good is that in the end? Proverbs 11 says: "Riches do not profit in the day of wrath, But righteousness delivers from death." The man had riches but he did not have righteousness, either his own, which none of us have, or God's, which is ours by faith. Jesus warns in Luke's Gospel (6:24-25): "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full, for you shall hunger. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep." The rich who have no faith have already received their reward, but in eternity they shall have none. And so Abraham explains to the rich man as he sits now in Hell, "Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented." Putting his trust in his wealth, loving his wealth above all things, the rich man comes to be poor. His chosen god, the idol of sumptuous living, could not save him.

Proverbs 13 (:7) says: "There is one who makes himself rich, yet has nothing; and one who makes himself poor, yet has great riches." The rich man in the parable had much, everything that most people strive to gain in this life. But he lacked the most precious treasure, the one thing that he really needed in order to be truly rich. He lacked faith. Now how do we know this? We know this because at the end of the story he asks Abraham to send Lazarus to his five brothers to warn them against Hell. And Abraham replies to his request: "They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them." And when the rich man protests and says: "No, father Abraham, but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent", Abraham says, 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.'" The implication here is that rich man had had Moses and the prophets too in his life time, but had refused to hear them. He had refused to believe and take the Word of the Lord to heart. He did not trust it. He did not have faith.

Lazarus, however, evidently did. We find him who suffered so greatly in this life safely in Abraham's bosom. God's grace and promises to us in Christ are more precious than all the wealth this world can offer. Faith lays hold of those promises and appropriates them when they are given. Faith in Christ lays hold of Christ's righteousness. And His righteousness becomes our own. And so the Psalmist can say (37:16): "A little that a righteous man has is better than the riches of many wicked." For the righteous man who trusts in Christ Jesus is taken to heaven, whereas the wicked suffer eternally.

And do not think that because they are spoken of in a parable that Heaven and Hell are not real destinations. They are! And you will end up in one or the other, for there is no third place in eternity, no limbo, no purgatory, no nirvana. There are but two paths, the way of life and the way of death.

It is a matter of where you put your hopes and in whom you trust. And riches are not the only idol that leads one to Hell. Any false god can take you down that path, whether you put your trust in a false religion, in wealth, in power, in reputation, or in your own goodness and good deeds. If you put your trust in these things, if you make yourself rich in them so that you turn away from God and the true riches of His Word and grace, then you will find yourself with nothing. And as we see in the parable there is no second chance in Hell. This is why Paul said (I Timothy 6:17): "Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy."

But if you make yourself poor in spirit, emptying yourself of all of these vanities and idolatries in repentance and turning instead to the mercy of Jesus, then He will make you rich. Proverbs 22 (:4) says: "By humility and the fear of the LORD are riches and honor and life"; and Solomon was not speaking here merely about earthly riches, honor and life, but about the eternal and heavenly riches and honor and life. And these riches our Lord offers you even now in this earthly life. For when you were baptized you were already placed in Abraham's bosom, for there you were raised up and made to be one of his offspring, a member of the true Israel by faith, which numbers more than the stars in the sky. And you have fellowship and unity with Abraham and all the heavenly saints at the Communion Table, where heaven is brought down to earth in the giving of Jesus' body and blood, the heavenly banquet that gives eternal life to the faithful. And trusting the Word and promises of God concerning His grace and mercy to us in Christ Jesus, you are already, like Abraham accounted righteous. And those whom Christ has called righteous have no need to fear the eternal fires of Hell, for they already are partakers of heaven, having by faith followed the path of life in Christ Jesus, to whom be all glory and honor now and forever. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, to life everlasting.

✧ Soli Deo gloria ✧