

06/14/20

1st Sunday after Holy Trinity

Lessons from our Savior's parable--the rich man and poor Lazarus

Luke 16: 19-31

There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day.

But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate,

desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table.

Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores.

So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried.

And being in torment in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.

Then he cried and said, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame."

But Abraham said, "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.

And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us."

Then he said, "I beg therefore, father, that you would send him to my father's house,

for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment."

Abraham said to him, "They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them."

And he said, "No, father Abraham, but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent."

But he said to him, "If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead." Amen.

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

There was a time when the parable which Jesus tells in our Gospel-text for this first Sunday after Trinity, the story of "the rich man and poor Lazarus," was very well-known to almost everyone in the western world—so much so that novelists and poets and speech-makers could make

allusions to this little story in order to make a point, and they could expect that all their readers or hearers would immediately understand. Stage-presentations or literary versions of the story were common. The tradition even gave to the rich man a name—"Dives," which actually is just the Latin word for "rich man," taken from the Latin Bible which was for so long the primary version of Scripture used in the West. It is, unfortunately, not so much the case anymore that people are so familiar with the Scriptures or with the parables which our Savior used in His preaching. That should serve as a reminder to all of us—parents, teachers, grandparents—that there is a special need today for Bible-Story Books and family-devotions and the reading of sections of Scripture to our children so that the Scriptures become more and more familiar to us again.

As is true of virtually all His other stories and illustrations, it is not difficult to understand and to find applications for this one in our text. It sharpens our grasp of the story, however, when we keep in mind that on this occasion Jesus was speaking to a group of Pharisees who were, St. Luke tells us, "lovers of money." They prided themselves in their knowledge of Scripture, and they were so sure that they were keeping the Law of God well-enough to be their own Saviors, and yet they had fallen into the grubby sin of greed; they loved money and the things it can buy more than they loved their Lord. It is these who especially needed to hear of the poor man Lazarus who went to heaven, and the rich man who went to hell.

I

The first lesson in Jesus' story is a simple one about our priorities—about whether our chief concern is for what is temporal or what is eternal. The name "Lazarus" means "God is my help," and that was true of this poor man despite the misery in which he had to live—hungry, covered with sores, left to beg at the gate of one who had much more in the way of earthly goods. God was indeed this poor man's help, and when he died, he was carried to heaven by angels. Lazarus had nothing in this life, but he trusted in the saving, testament-giving God of Abraham who had promised to send a Messiah. Through his faith in that Anointed One, Lazarus was counted as righteous by Israel's God and given that eternal reward of grace which makes all that we endure here on earth seem transient and unimportant.

The nameless rich man in Jesus' story, we are told, dressed in the finest clothing and feasted sumptuously every day. And yet we understand immediately that it is not his lavish life-style which is his wrong-doing. Even though, in order to enter his home, he literally has to step over the starving beggar at his gate, he offers the man no food—not even the crumbs

from his table. To this sore-covered sufferer, he offers no oil or balm or medical care. His only concern is the pleasure he can buy with his money, and his selfish lack of compassion stands as indisputable proof of his unbelief. The Savior-God of Israel had no place in his heart, and therefore at his death he ends up in eternal torment. This is the first lesson learned from Jesus' story, and we need to ask ourselves, what is it that fills our hearts? In times of plenty or in times of hardship, we need to keep in mind that this life is not all there is, that it is rather only the stepping stone into eternity, and that beyond lies either an endless life with our Lord or the endless death of being separated from Him. Our focus should be on the salvation which our Lord offers to us.

II

A second lesson here is easily learned from Jesus' story. In belated concern for his brothers, the rich man pleads from hell that Abraham should send Lazarus to preach to them so that they might repent. Against Abraham's reminder that they have the Word of God, he again insists that the spectacular appearance of someone who had died—like Lazarus—would really be more effective and would lead them to change their ways. But Abraham firmly corrects him and says, "If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead." The Lord changes hearts through His word—period. No gimmicks, no special effects, no miraculous or frightening apparitions from the next world—He unmask our need for a Savior through His holy Law, and He works faith in our hearts through His Gospel as it comes to us in word and sacrament. That Gospel alone, St. Paul says, is "the power of God unto salvation."

Also this second lesson in Jesus' story is vital for us today. You and I are living in strange times—threatened by a pandemic which has taken so many lives, enduring in our country the evils of racial fears and hatred and the senseless violence which can, it seems, erupt so easily in the context of protests against such injustice. Especially in such times in which the very fabric of our society seems to be tearing, we need to remember our need for "Moses and the Prophets"—for the Word of the Cross which proclaims to us the atoning sacrifice which Mary's Son has offered for us and which makes His victory over the grave on Easter morning belong to us. In troubled times like these, that Gospel-word about the Lord's Anointed and His saving work is for us a rock on which we can stand and the only true refuge for our souls.

III

And there is a third lesson which can be easily learned from Jesus' story in our text. What we immediately recognize as the real sin of the rich

man is his callous indifference to the sufferings of Lazarus. On the one hand, our Savior thus demonstrates the unbelief of this man which is made clear by the barren lovelessness in his heart. And at the same time, our Savior issues to us—to His people of faith—a call to serve poor Lazarus as we can.

Who is the Lazarus whom we know? He is surely the homeless beggar on the corner, but he also comes to us in other forms—disabled and needy veterans, abused women or children, those who cannot find employment, those who have lost everything in a natural disaster, the sick, the hungry, and so many more. In the “General Prayer of the Church,” we ask the Lord’s mercy for the poor and the homeless and the weak and the vulnerable. One reason for such petitions is that such suffering people are all around us in this fallen world. And to you and me, who have received by faith the forgiveness for which Christ Jesus paid such a heavy price and who have received as our own His resurrection-victory, our Savior now assigns the blessed task of serving Lazarus.

We know that we cannot do everything or help everyone. But Jesus’ story should lead us to ask in all earnestness, “What can we do, and whom can we help?” Here at Old Zion, we collect food and clothing for the poor—that is one concrete service we can offer to Lazarus. And there are other ways that we can show the love of Christ—in our congregation, in our communities, in our city.

Through His story of “the rich man and poor Lazarus,” our Savior teaches us to keep our priorities straight and to focus on what is of eternal worth. He reminds us that we depend for the life of our souls on “Moses and the Prophets”—on His Gospel word through which the Holy Spirit works faith in our hearts to receive our Savior’s blood-bought forgiveness and new life. And He calls us to do what we can to serve poor Lazarus—to illustrate to others in word and deed the saving love we have received. That, we could say, is the program He has outlined for us which can keep us busy during this Season of Trinity.

May the Holy Spirit help us to be diligent in hearing that Word of life for Jesus’ sake. Amen.