

June 11, 2023
Text: Luke 16:19-31

First Sunday after Trinity

Our Gospel text this morning, the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, is one of the more pointed teachings of Jesus. The reason it's so pointed, so direct, is that in it Jesus is talking about what really matters.

He directs us away from this life and calls on us to think about the life to come. Jesus reminds us what it is that leads us to our eternal dwelling. He does all this through words of comfort, words of warning, and words of admonition. Through comfort, warning, and admonition, Jesus has us dwell on what really matters.

So first, the words of comfort. These are given as Jesus speaks about the beggar, Lazarus. When Jesus begins to describe Lazarus, the words certainly don't sound comforting. Indeed, Lazarus's life is anything but comfortable.

He's a leper, and so every part of his earthly life is awful. Lazarus's body was broken by the disease. He's covered in open sores that never heal, sores that are both disfiguring and painful. The disease had progressed to the point where Lazarus couldn't even walk. He had to be carried around by others – assuming he could even find someone willing to touch a leper, to become unclean through helping him.

Lazarus has nothing, just the ragged clothes on his back. Because of his uncleanness and his physical condition, the only option left to him is begging, which is no path to riches, or even to a full stomach, as Jesus describes.

Not only is he hungry and in pain, he's lonely. No one would want to associate with a leper. Lepers are poor. Lepers are disgusting. Lepers are needy. Maybe, some thought, lepers are even cursed by God, punished for some horrible sin. Not someone you'd want in your social circle.

And in all this, Lazarus was undoubtedly attacked by the devil with doubt. Surely he wondered at times what he had done to deserve all this. When would it end? Where were the answers to his prayers?

Lazarus's existence in this life is one of suffering. Yet that suffering doesn't go on forever. No, eventually Lazarus dies. At that moment, the Lord God replaces Lazarus's suffering with peace and joy.

The Lord sends His holy angels to bring Lazarus up into heaven. There, this man who had been shunned by others is brought into the company of the greatest of saints, such as faithful Abraham.

All of Lazarus's physical suffering is taken away; the leprosy which had afflicted him is gone, never to return. In its place, Lazarus is given the perfect comfort of God, feeling infinitely better than anyone ever has in this earthly life.

Lazarus's poverty is no longer a thing; he no longer must beg for scraps. He enjoys the perfect provision of God, with everything that he needs provided by God's overflowing power and goodness.

And especially, all of Lazarus's doubts and worries are gone. He no longer wonders "Why?," because he can behold firsthand the perfect results of how God guided all things for his good. He no

more wonders when the suffering will end; it has ended, never to return. Lazarus no longer is tempted to ask if God truly loves him. He now basks in the presence of God Himself, filled completely with the love radiating from the Lord throughout heaven.

All of this – the peace, the comfort, the joy, the love, they will never end. Lazarus has been brought into heaven, to Abraham’s side, and nothing can take him away from there.

Lazarus had bad things in his earthly life, but those years are the blink of an eye compared to the eternity in which he will enjoy the good things of God. The promises given to Lazarus in God’s Word – spoken through Moses and the Prophets – the promises in which Lazarus had trusted during his earthly suffering – they are now fulfilled.

These promises are the ones given to you as well. In this life, you will have suffering. That’s the reality of being sinners living in a world broken by sin.

Yet just as God sustained Lazarus through his sufferings and finally brought him to paradise, God will sustain you in this life and bring you to paradise when you die. All your pain, your sorrows, your frustrations, your doubts, everything bad, will be done away with, replaced with the perfect goodness which the Lord has desired to give you from the foundation of the world.

God granted Lazarus faith through His Word, and this faith both strengthened Lazarus in this life and saved him for life in eternity. God grants you faith through His Word, and this faith in Him and in His love for you will strengthen you to face the struggles of this life and bring you into heaven.

In this parable, Jesus grants comfort, letting you know that, whatever you face in this life, it is a short time compared to the eternity in paradise which He has won for you on the cross.

You can reject this comfort, though. This is the warning Jesus gives in the parable, seen in the rich man. This guy had been blessed by God with great wealth in this life. He wears the clothing worn by kings and emperors, both very comfortable and very flashy. He spends every day feasting, indulging in the finer things of life, never wanting for anything, never having to go without.

And as feasts are social events, this man no doubt had plenty of earthly friends. Such riches would’ve bought him access to the inner circles of society – the who’s who of first century Jerusalem. In every earthly way, this man has a successful life, one that every worldly person of the time would aspire to.

But, as with Lazarus, this man’s earthly life doesn’t go on forever. He too dies and is buried. But no angels come for him. He just continues to sink down, down into the crushing darkness of hell. There, his time of joy and comfort and plenty comes to an end, replaced by endless and unimaginable torments.

He is in agony in the flames, and unlike earthly flames, which eventually sear the nerves and stop the pain, these flames bring pain which never ends or dulls.

In addition to physical pain, the man is afflicted with emotional pain – loneliness and hatred. Note that he doesn’t ask anyone else down there for help. The Bible teaches that there will be plenty of people in hell. But down there, no one is your friend, no one is your family, no one cares for you. No,

you are hated by everyone, and you hate everyone else. This man doesn't want his brothers down there because he knows that they'll all hate each other.

Hell is both loneliness and being unable to get away from people you hate. In hell, there are no friends, no family, no love for others, because these things are all gifts of God, and in hell all the gifts of God are gone.

Not only does the formerly rich man suffer physically and emotionally in hell, he will also endure deep spiritual pain and guilt. This may be the worst.

Jesus says that the rich man, in his torments, lifts up his eyes and beholds Abraham and Lazarus in paradise. Now whether the damned can actually see those in heaven, or whether this is part of the parable and its illustrative nature, the fact remains that those in hell will know the reality that God and His Word are true. The rich man can see that the promises from Moses and the Prophets were true.

As he writhes in the unending flames, as he is crushed by loneliness, as he is cursed by all those there with him, as he suffers endlessly, he'll know that it didn't have to be this way. It didn't have to be this way. He'll know that God had desired to save him, and that he had rejected God and His promises. He'll spend eternity knowing that it's his fault.

That rejection of God and His Word is what landed this guy in hell. It's not that he was rich. God blesses lots of people with riches, including righteous Abraham.

No, the man is in hell because he turned away from God and desired the pleasures and comforts of this life. This is shown in his actions. He is totally focused on himself, on his earthly pleasure, his earthly comfort, his earthly happiness. He'll scratch the backs of those who can scratch his, but when it comes to those who seemingly have nothing to offer him, such as an invalid beggar laid at his gate, then he can't be bothered to even send out a plate of leftovers on occasion.

The man's actions show what is in his heart, what he truly believes, despite what he might say otherwise. As we heard in our Epistle reading, "If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen."

There's one other part we must note about the warning Jesus gives here. What makes the rich man's condemnation so tragic is that he rejected promises that he knew.

When he is in hell, he isn't confused as to where he is, or who Abraham is. When Abraham speaks of Moses and the Prophets, the man doesn't ask who they are. He knows. This doesn't mean that ignorance of God's Word is a valid excuse; it isn't. But this man's condemnation is all the worse for the fact that he rejected what he'd heard, what he'd be taught, what he had publicly confessed at one point.

Abraham calls the man "Child." This condemned man was a son of Abraham, given the promises of God and joined to God's people when he was circumcised. He had been taught the Word of God in the synagogues. He had been given the promises of salvation and rejected them.

In today's terms, this is someone who had been baptized, given new life and joined to the people of God, someone who had been taught the faith, confirmed, as we would say... and then had turned his back on it to chase after the things of the world.

For all the things the rich man had, do you know what Jesus pointedly notes he doesn't have? A name. Sure, he had one in this life, but through his rejection of the Lord, he blotted his own name out of the book of life. He is one of those the Lord speaks to in other parables, one who hears the terrible words from God, "Truly, I say to you, I do not know you."

Having given such a stark warning, Jesus then gives an admonition, an instruction, putting it in the mouth of Abraham in the parable. Having been asked to send Lazarus to warn the rich man's brothers, that they not come into the place of torment, Abraham responds and says, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them."

It is not signs or wonders that can bring the brothers to change their ways. It is the Word of God. It is the Word of God, the Holy Scriptures, that are able to make one wise unto salvation. It is through the Word that the Holy Spirit works to convict a person of sin and lead him to repentance and faith. It is through the Word that our Lord guides us along the right path toward His Kingdom.

God uses the Word to feed the faith given to you in Baptism. God uses the Word to let His sheep hear His voice. God uses the Word to equip His saints for the conflict with the powers of darkness.

When the world tempts you with prosperity, fine linen and purple cloth, large salaries and lots of toys, it is God's Word that will remind you that such things will pass away, but the treasures laid up for you in heaven will never pass away.

When the world tempts you with popularity, being well-liked, well-thought-of by others, it is the Word that will remind you that the world's opinion is fickle and ever-changing, but the Lord's love for you never ends.

When the world tempts you to focus on the here and now, the Word directs your eyes toward eternity.

In times of suffering, the Word will remind you of the peace to come, yours through the grace of God. In times of confusion, the Word will serve as a lamp to your feet and a light to your path. In times of loneliness, the Word will remind you that you have been joined to the eternal family of God, and that your Lord will never abandon His own.

Through Moses and the Prophets, through the Apostles and Evangelists, God speaks and tells you of His love for you, that because of His Son, you need not perish like the rich man but with Abraham, Lazarus, and all the saints, have everlasting life.

In the name of Jesus, amen.