

The First Sunday after Trinity
23 June, Anno Domini 2019
St. Luke 16:19-31
Pr. Kurt Ulmer

In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

The story Jesus tells today cuts down to the fundamental question “Who or what is your god?”. To put it in the language Dr. Luther uses in the Large Catechism, from what or whom do we expect all good and in what or whom do we take refuge in all distress? Last week we had the great joy of confessing with the whole Christian Church that the Triune God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - is the only true God. There is no other God. There isn't anyone or anything who can help us in our time of need and give us that which is good for this life and eternal life.

And yet, there are innumerable gods. Everywhere you turn there is a new person, a new program, a new product, a new pill that we simply must have, that will make everything better, that will finally bring us real happiness. A new election season is upon us both in our government and within our synod. Watch how many people will offer themselves up as the only one who can do it right and really help us. And watch how many people will try to convince you that our only hope is if this or that candidate is elected. The problem is that none of them can actually help you. They may be helpful. God may use them to help you. But they are as dependent upon the Lord as you are. And none of them can take away the guilt of your sin. None of them can set your conscience at ease. None of them can defend you from the devil's assaults. They might make you feel better for a time like the rich man's full barns and full belly, but they will fail and you will be left with nothing.

What have you set your heart on? What do you count as your good? What we want to say, what we should be able to say is that we trust only and always in the true God revealed in the Holy Scriptures. We want to say that we fear, love, and trust in Him and Him alone above absolutely everything else and are completely satisfied with whatever daily bread He graciously gives. We want to say that there is nothing in His Holy Word that we doubt in the slightest. But we know that's not true. It takes only a moment or two before we can start making a very long list of others things upon which we set our hearts, false gods who we hope will protect us and provide for us. So often we are like the Pharisees to whom Jesus told this parable, lovers of money who justify ourselves before men. We convince ourselves that our worries and fears are founded, that our works are good. We

allow our hearts to get bound up with our money, our homes, our families, our reputations. So long as we have these just as we want them we are fine but even the possibility of letting them go causes us panic and dread. How many of us aspire to be like the rich man (until he died) and encourage our children to great things, even sacrificing their spiritual welfare on the altar of academic and career success? Perhaps you are tempted by the allure of popularity and really want people to think that you're a great person, handsome, funny, or cool. Among younger generations it is growing all the more common to worship the idol of technology and entertainment and fame. Many refuse to be happy unless they have the latest and fastest phones or apps or gaming systems. Others minds are consumed by whatever game they have invested hours and even days of their lives in, spurning family, friends, and their Lord. Nothing else matters. Reason, science, pleasure, myself - the list of false gods is endless.

Repent. God knows your heart and the things that it has set above Him. He sees how you have sought to be comforted with earthly things, even evil things while despising Him and the good gifts that He gives. He sees how you have given His throne to that which is not God. The rich man was filled to overflowing in this life with the good things his heart desired and then he died. Where were those things then? The very things he loved killed him because they blinded him to his need for the things of God. The rich man had everything that man loves and praises - money, reputation, comfort. And you too will certainly receive the praises of men if you have these things. But beware. Jesus calls these things abominations to God, literally, things that emit a foul odor and cause Him to turn away in disgust. God is not impressed by the shiny things that cause men to be impressed. He hates them.

And He hates them because He is jealous for you. He knows that such things are killing you. When your belly and your bank accounts are flush, when your ears are dripping with the praises of men, when you are proud of yourself and your accomplishments the Lord knows you are in grave danger because you will begin to imagine that you really don't need Him. Those things will be sufficient for you. You will begin to despise His mercy because you no longer taste your need for it and, consequently, you will begin to refuse mercy to those who need it from you. Satan will happily fan you and fill your drink so that you are no longer disturbed by your sin. You have the good things your heart desired. "How bad can I really be if God has blessed me so?"

This is especially true when it comes to righteousness. God is disgusted by the very things which the world holds up as the most pious and religious and holy.

The world knows nothing of the true worship of God because it hates Moses and the Prophets and all that God has spoken. It is hatred of God to be pleased with ourselves because we have been less wicked than others, to trade the absolution of Christ for our good intentions, to be perfectly content without the Holy Communion and give no thought to the gift given in Holy Baptism, to despise prayer and the study of God's Word. The highest and most holy worship given to God is faith in His Word, believing His promises, taking all our comfort and peace in Him alone, living alone by His mercy.

Children of God, this is why the Lord graciously allows you to suffer affliction. It's why He lays crosses upon you, crosses that cannot be helped by worldly means. He loves you. You can't live without His mercy. Though we often foolishly forget and start chasing again after false gods, our heavenly Father knows that He alone is our help, our shield, and our reward, that He alone cares for us. It was poor, miserable Lazarus who was carried to rest by the angels and comforted in Abraham's bosom; not because he was poor, but because he hungered for mercy and found it in the promises of God.

Is this not the repeated story throughout Scripture? Those who flourished in this world, grew cold to their need for God and began chasing after other gods. Did we not hear in Nehemiah of Israel's turning from God when they "ate and were filled and became fat and delighted themselves in (God's) great goodness"? And, as a result, "they were disobedient and rebelled against (God) and cast (God's) law behind their back and killed (God's) prophets who had warned them in order to turn them back to (God), and they committed great blasphemies." Solomon's great wisdom and riches became a stumbling block to him. Many of the Jews at the time of Jesus had turned from the true God and worshipped their earthly wealth and supposed good works.

Listen to Moses and the prophets. Believe the word which God spoke through them. Acknowledge that you, like Lazarus are a poor beggar who lives only on the mercy of God. You have no righteousness of your own, no goodness to trust. Your heart is as filled with sin as any other man and you are just as helpless to save yourself as the other Lazarus, the Lazarus of Bethany, was to raise himself from the dead and leave the tomb. Whatever earthly treasures you may have mean nothing before God. Their abundance doesn't prove His love neither does their absence prove His anger. And if your trust and hope and joy are in them, then you have the wrong God.

As St. John writes in his epistle to the Church, it is in Jesus that we have and know the love and mercy of the Father. God's love for you is measured in His willingness to save you from your sin and the damnation you deserve because of that sin. God's love for you is measured in His willingness to forgive you for setting earthly treasures on His throne and trusting that they will care for you and provide for you in your need. God's love for you is measured by the Blood His Son poured out on Calvary to make atonement for your sin, Blood which He gives you this day in the Holy Communion.

In truth, there is only one who is rich, God Himself. But this rich man takes the greatest pleasure in sharing His riches with you, in not simply tossing you a few crumbs while you lie at His gate, but inviting you to His feast, binding up your wounds, clothing you in the heavenly raiment of His righteousness, and serving you.

Rejoice, all you Lazaruses who long to be filled with the good things of God, because you will be filled to overflowing with His goodness and you will know the comfort of the holy angels, Father Abraham, and the whole company of saints who gather around the good things of the one, true God.

In the Name of +Jesus.