

The First Sunday after Trinity with the Rite of Holy Baptism for Teche
Thibodeaux
19 June, Anno Domini 2022
St. Luke 16:19-31

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Dear redeemed of the Lord,

I use the story of the rich man and Lazarus to teach catechumens the first three commandments. In particular, this account of the sharp contrast between the rich man and Lazarus and their condition on earth versus their condition in eternity serves to demonstrate what it means to have a god, the blessings of trusting in the true God, and the terrible, eternal consequences of not.

We all have gods. Gods are whatever it is you believe in and look to for help in times of need and give you all that is good. Thus, there really isn't any such thing as an atheist because everybody puts their trust in something even if that trust is in themselves. What or who gives you peace in your time of distress? When things are falling apart what calms your heart and mind? That is your god. It could be and ought to be the true God who created you, who sustains you and all creation, and who redeemed your life. But it could also be another deposit in the bank, a drop in the price of gas or a smaller grocery bill, the health of your body, a politician, popularity, comfort, how you feel about something, science, full cupboards, fun, sports, or the most common of them all - you. It isn't a question of whether or not you have a god. Rather, it is always a question of whether that god is the true and only God or just a worthless idol and another mask of the devil.

The eternal judgment of the rich man would have been a complete shock to those around him. By every usual earthly measure, he was a good and God-pleasing man. Look at how he feasted! God lavished upon him an abundance of the finest foods from the fat portion of the sacrifices brought by God's people. Look at how he dressed! He wore the fine purple linen of the Levitical priesthood. He and his five brothers had been appointed by God among all of Israel to offer prayers and sacrifices to make atonement for the sins of God's people. If you knew him, you would never have guessed that he was an idolatrous unbeliever who would land squarely in the fiery judgment of hell.

But by pulling back the curtain, Jesus reveals that this wicked priest's god was his fine earthly things. So long as he had them, he was blind to his need for God's mercy. He figured he had worked hard and deserved the rich treasures which he now enjoyed. That's why he wouldn't even drop crumbs for poor Lazarus. The rich man thought "Mercy is for those who haven't earned good things. Mercy is for people who aren't as pious and holy as I am. Why should I show mercy to others and give them the things that God has rewarded to me for my obedience and faithfulness? If they would be as good as me and work as hard as I do to show God what a good person I am, then God would lift them up off the street and bless them as much as He has blessed me."

But the rich man was a fool who despised the true God because the true God is the God of mercy. He is the God who assigned the sacrifices this rich man offered as a temporary atonement for sins. He is the God who brought the rich man's ancestors up out of slavery in Egypt and led them through the wilderness in the Promised Land, bearing with their constant grumbling. The true God is the God who heard the cries of His exiled children and brought them back to Jerusalem. The true God is the God who promised the Seed of the woman who would crush the head of the serpent and once and for all atone for the sins of the whole world.

The rich man, like so many of his ancestors, despised the preaching of Moses and the Prophets, refused their calls to repentance, turned a blind eye to the sin and unbelief that were oozing out of his heart. He detested God's Word which called him away from his idolatry and to put his trust instead in the God of Abraham. Believing himself to be a good and righteous man, the rich man feasted his way right into the flames of everlasting judgment where not one drop of mercy or relief will ever be found.

We must confess that we have not always been unlike the rich man. Sure, we are disgusted by him now in hindsight, but that has not stopped us from dangerously falling in his footsteps and tempting God to deal with us the same way. We have loved all manner of riches and comforted ourselves with them. We have fantasized about all that we could do with more money, even cloaking it with what we would do for others and for the church as though lack of money is the problem rather than lack of faith and trust in God. We have breathed a sigh of relief with each paycheck. We have comforted ourselves with the thought of the next election and getting the "good guys" in office who will fix all our woes. We have chased after the dream of security in this life through the right investing strategies. Our anxiety has followed the gains and losses of the stock market. We have withheld our offerings because we had other priorities and didn't want to make the sacrifice.

And having thus made earthly wealth our god, despising the heavenly riches of God's mercy, we have despised our neighbor who needed our mercy, blaming their suffering on their unrighteousness.

Have our ears grown deaf to the calls of Moses and the Prophets and even Christ Himself "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!"? Do we comfort ourselves with our own righteousness? Have we neglected the rich food of Christ's holy Body and Blood so that we could indulge the momentary desires of our flesh? Have we failed to lift up the needs of our church and our neighbor to the throne of mercy that God might rain down His mercy upon us and keep us in the truth faith? Do we offer the sacrifices of a broken spirit and a contrite heart? Do we take care to keep ourselves from all that God has shown is unclean and brings only death?

The sad answer is that we, the royal priesthood of God, have neglected our duties, neglected God's mercy, and neglected our neighbor. We have very often thought that being a Christian is a way to enrich ourselves here on earth instead of counting everything in this world as loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ. We have despised the thought that we ought to be like Lazarus, beggars before the throne of God.

What possible earthly good did Lazarus have? His body was ravaged with some kind of disease that left him covered in grotesque open sores. Consequently, he would have been judged as unclean and cast out of the temple and the community. He had no earthly wealth and desperately longed for even a crumb that might accidentally fall from the rich man's table. He couldn't buy bread or offer anything in exchange. If we saw Lazarus today we would probably scoot to the other side of road and maybe even act like we didn't see him. The need for the mercy of others defined Lazarus' life.

But it was Lazarus, once carried to the rich man's gate where no mercy was to be found, who was carried by the angels to father Abraham's bosom to taste forever the riches of God's mercy in heaven. It was Lazarus (whose name means "one whom God helps") who was clothed in royal robe of Christ's righteousness because he trusted in God. It was Lazarus who forever feasts at the banquet table of God at the marriage feast of the Lamb whose kingdom has no end. Lazarus' God was the true God, the helper of the helpless. Though Lazarus knew only sorrow and suffering in life, he believed the God who promised Abraham the descendants of salvation. He believed that though he had nothing to commend him to God, yet God would receive Him because God promised salvation to sinners.

And wonderful that before us this morning we see a beautiful picture of exactly what we are considering. Teche brings nothing to the font, not even himself. He must be brought to God by parents who believe the promises of Christ. Teche is completely in every way dependent upon mercy. He cannot feed himself. He cannot clean himself. He is totally helpless and dependent upon others to give him what he needs. The truth that we so often and easily forget, is that no matter how old any of us gets, we are just as dependent on the mercy of God as Teche is this day. But unless we will receive the kingdom of God as Teche does, as pure gift, purely passively, if we imagine that we contribute in any way to our salvation, we will find ourselves like the rich man, completely without mercy for all of eternity.

God the Father Almighty, the truly rich man, to whom belong the cattle on a thousand hills and the farthest stars, has not only offered crumbs from His table but has given you the true Bread from heaven, the God-man, to satisfy your hunger for righteousness. He has given the most precious thing, His Son, as the sacrifice for our wretchedness and arrogance and disobedience. Christ has stepped down from the glories of heaven to not only help us poor sinners, but to take our place, to cover Himself in the vile disease of our sin and to let it consume Him so that we might walk through the gates of eternal life and take our places as sons of the Most High God.

You who have been clothed with Christ in Holy Baptism, true children of Abraham, do not exchange the eternal treasures of life and righteousness and salvation for the worthless wealth of this world which moth and rust destroy and which thieves break in and steal. Though it cannot be seen by the eyes, the riches that have been bestowed upon you by your heavenly Father are of infinitely more value than anything you can accumulate on this earth. You have all the riches of God Himself. What a small thing it is then, to show extravagant mercy to the Lazarus' laid before you. It costs you nothing.

May God our Father so fill us poor Lazaruses with His mercy and compassion that in great joy and thankfulness we may pour out the same mercy to all around us who are in need. May He grant that our hearts trust in the one and only true God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - and look to Him alone for all good.

In the Name of +Jesus.

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all understanding keeps your hearts and your minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Pastor Ulmer