

Trinity I, 2006
Text: Luke 16:19-31
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✠Grace, Mercy, and Peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ ✠

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

If you were asked to list your problems, the things that are wrong, out of sorts, difficult in your life – what would that list look like? A lack of funds to pay the bills or do the things you want to do would probably be on there. Or perhaps health issues – a chronic illness, pain, or injury. Stress at work, the problems of raising a family, dealing with friends, potholes in the roads, weeds in the garden, moles in the lawn, a house that needs painted, a kitchen that never seems to stay clean. Yes, the cares of this world are many. Your list no doubt would be long. You are no doubt daily tempted to focus on these problems, the things you see with your eyes, the things the world urges you to worry about.

But repent. For these are not really your problems. That is the message of Jesus today in this parable. The things we see with our eyes cannot be trusted. The appearances of this world lie to us. What appear to be the problems of the rich man and Lazarus are not their real problems – what appear as their strengths, are not their real strengths.

For example, the problem of the rich man is not that he is rich. You may be tempted to think that this is the case – that the point of the parable is that people who have it easy on earth get it hard in Hades and that those who, like Lazarus, suffer on earth earn a spot in heaven with their suffering. Hardly. God owes us nothing – he is the Creator, we the creatures, he can never be in our debt. We can buy his favor with our hardships as little as we can buy it with our dollars.

No the rich man's problem is not that he is rich – Jesus makes that clear by saying that Lazarus, when he died, rested with St. Abraham while he waited for the resurrection. You see, Abraham was a very, very rich man. He was, indeed, the ruler of a small kingdom – once able to summon 318 of his men to go on a military expedition to save his nephew Lot. He had flocks and herds past counting and never wanted for a thing. It was within his power to be clothed in purple everyday and feast sumptuously. And he is not condemned for it. There he is at rest and in peace waiting for the Resurrection. Since Abraham is not condemned for his riches, neither is this rich man in the parable condemned for his riches.

Nor has Lazarus earned his blessing because of his suffering. Many, many others have suffered more than Lazarus did and ended up in Hades in torment. For example, in the book of Acts we read of King Herod Agrippa who suffered horribly from an intestinal disease and was consumed from the inside out by

worms. But this suffering, just as wretched as Lazarus', did not earn Herod a place at Abraham's side.

So all the rich are not condemned, all the poor and suffering are not saved. So what's the point of the parable? Why is the rich man condemned and Lazarus saved? For that you must look a little more deeply into the parable and notice one detail that occurs nowhere else in the parables of our Lord: a name. In all the other parables of Jesus he speaks of “a certain man. . .” or “A certain merchant” or “A man” or “A sower.”

But this parable is different – one of the characters in this parable has a name: Lazarus. That is the key, for the name Lazarus means “God is my help.” That is the meaning to the parable. Lazarus is not saved because he suffers – but because he clings to God as his only help. The rich man is not condemned because he is rich, but because he trusts in himself and his riches more than he trusts in God.

That is what puts Abraham and Lazarus on one side and the unnamed rich man on the other. Abraham is the father of faith – as we heard in our Old Testament lesson today he believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. So also Lazarus found that in his faith in God he had more true riches than that supposedly rich man who actually had nothing at all that would last. For purple clothes and fine linen will all one day fall apart and rot. Sumptuous food is here for but a moment. The mansions of the rich will one day crumble to dust. Indeed, you yourself will one day die and be gathered to your fathers. So learn well the lesson of Lazarus: you have only one help, only one hope, the Lord your God.

For look what the Lord your God has done for you. He became more poor and wretched and lonely than even Lazarus. He came to his own people and they knew him not, they rejected him; they passed him by, shaking their heads, as he lay outside the city gates with a cross on his back. While foxes have holes and birds have nests and rich men have houses, Jesus had no place to lay his head. When he was arrested, beaten, and sore injuries covered his body from a thorn pressed head to nail pierced feet, no one was there to comfort, no one was there to heal or even give a drop of water when he cried out from the cross, “I thirst.” All this suffering and dying on the part of Jesus is for you to fill up the punishment of your sins – it is your only help and hope. So give up on the things of this world and trust in him alone.

For, dear Christian, what riches can give you the things that Christ gives you? Even if you are as rich as the rich man in the parable, even if your wealth exceeded that of all the kings of the world, still it is fleeting! It lasts but a moment. So do not put your trust in riches. And do not put your fear in poverty. For as this parable shows, riches or poverty simply do not matter. What matters is where you put your trust. To fear poverty is really the same thing as to love riches: it is to trust

the things of this world for your safety and security.

But give up on that. There is no safety or security in riches, or in good health, or in any earthing blessing – there is nothing really to fear from poverty or even suffering. Your only salvation, your only security is in Christ. If you have him, you have it all. He cares for his children and will not leave you desolate. Behold the lilies of the field – even rich King Solomon in all his glory was not clothed as one of these. And think on the birds of the air, they do not reap or sow and yet your Father in heaven cares for them. And look at poor Lazarus, suffering and alone – and yet not alone. For God is his help. Do not let your eyes deceive you. Lazarus is richer than the rich man because he has Jesus and the salvation Jesus provides with his death on the cross and his resurrection from the grave. So all these things will be added unto Lazarus in this life or the next.

So also you, dear Christian. You too have the riches of Lazarus. For the one prophesied about in Moses and the Prophets – the one who did rise from the dead, Jesus Christ has washed you up in Holy Baptism and made you his child. You now wear a robe finer than any clothes the rich may buy with their money – for you wear the robe of Christ's righteousness, you are washed whiter than snow in the crimson blood of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And you feast sumptuously at a banquet far better than even the fanciest restaurant can produce. For you are invited to the Table of the Lord where the Lord Jesus serves you with his very body and blood. You are thus filled with food that does not just give you strength for your earthly life – but strength for eternal life. In Christ, therefore, you have riches beyond compare. In this way, God is your help, your only help, and your fate is thus the same as that of Lazarus.

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

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Now the peace of God which passes all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

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