

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15

Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16

1 Timothy 6:6-19

Luke 16:19-31

From the very beginning of the Gospel of Luke, we have heard about the 'reversal of fortune' that is the central theme of this Gospel. In the very first chapter, we are introduced to Mary's Magnificat in which she describes all that her child will do in his lifetime to even the score between rich and poor. The entirety of this gospel returns again and again to the poor being elevated and the rich being brought down. In God's kingdom it seems there are no 'rich' people and no 'poor' people...at least not in terms of money and material goods. There are only people...all children of God and all welcomed to the table and no one of them any more important than another. This central theme runs through the entire gospel of Luke. The next life is where everything gets evened out.

This morning, we heard Jesus telling yet one more story about the difference between the rich and the poor in this life and God's attitude toward both. In this story, a rich man dressed in purple and fine linen feasted sumptuously every day within sight of people walking by. We aren't given his name, but he was apparently oblivious to the poor man, Lazarus, who was lingering at the rich man's gate...hungry and longing for the scraps that fell from the rich man's table. The rich man took no notice of him. He offered no food or drink or even a kind and sympathetic word. To him, Lazarus was invisible. The only touch Lazarus received was when the dogs came to lick his sores. Notice that we never hear the name of the rich man, but we are told the name of the poor man at the gate, Lazarus, several times. Being named, especially in a parable, signals to us the importance of this person. Eventually, both men died. Lazarus was carried away by angels to be with Abraham. The rich man wound up in Hades where he was tormented. He could see Lazarus with Abraham and he begged him for some relief from his torment. All he wanted was for Lazarus to bring a little water to him to cool his tongue, but Abraham declined. He reminded the rich man that he had received all good things in this life and Lazarus had not. And now, Lazarus was enjoying all the good things that had not come to him during his life on earth. He was safe and comfortable with Father Abraham. Besides as Abraham explained, there was an untraversable chasm between them now that had not impeded either of them when they were both on earth. When they were both on earth, there was no physical barrier between them. Now there was. When they were both on earth, they could have crossed back and forth from torment to comfort, but the rich man couldn't be bothered and Lazarus had no permission to wander into the rich man's space. However, now that the tables were turned, the rich man wanted Lazarus to come and rescue him. Abraham

explained that there was now no way to pass from one place to another as there had been on earth. All the rich man needed to do while he was on earth was walk down to his gate to speak to Lazarus and offer him some food and some water. But he didn't. As far as we know, he never acknowledged or even looked at Lazarus in this life. He couldn't be bothered...or perhaps he thought he didn't have enough to share with anyone else...or maybe he just didn't see Lazarus. Sometimes, we, too, are unable to see the suffering of another right in front of us. It makes us feel too uncomfortable or it feels frightening to us or perhaps we think this poor soul we can't even look at must have done something to deserve his plight. We don't know why the rich man never reached out to Lazarus and we don't know why we ourselves are uncomfortable when we see someone who is destitute. We also don't know why Lazarus was in such a painful predicament. We simply know that both of them were children of God...one with resources and one without. One was desperate for some relief and one simply didn't respond.

When the rich man realized that Lazarus would not be able to comfort or soothe his distress because of the great chasm between them, he begged Abraham to send someone to his father's house to warn his five brothers about their fate if they made the same choices he had made. Abraham reminded him that they had Moses and the prophets who had already explained all of this to them. The tormented rich man was not satisfied. He had also had Moses and the prophets and he had not listened to them. He knew that his brothers wouldn't either. But, he did believe that if someone went to his brothers from the dead and explained it all, they would repent and they would save themselves from eternal turmoil. Abraham calmly pointed out to the rich man that if his brothers had not listened to Moses and the prophets about how they were supposed to live and how they were supposed to care for one another in this life, they wouldn't be convinced if someone had risen from the dead either.

Was Father Abraham right? Do we receive the same information and fail to take the actions Jesus directs us to take? Do we actually believe that the decisions we make in this life will have no bearing on our experience of eternal life? Or have we failed to be convinced that Jesus meant what he said? Do we believe Jesus or do we not? Jesus' message to us was that the material things of this life could not be the be all and end all for us. Certainly Abraham himself was a very wealthy man...and God did not require him to divest himself of all his worldly goods. As a matter of fact, God used Abraham to create the nation of Israel known to all the world as God's chosen people. If we take that into consideration, we must pause then and think about what Jesus was telling us about wealth and prosperity. Apparently, it's not forbidden by God and it will not necessarily prevent us from entering the kingdom of heaven. Perhaps the point here is how we let our wealth and our prosperity dim our eyesight and how we manage to block our wealth out of our thoughts and our decision-making. Is our wealth *too* important to us? Do we allow it to cloud our judgement? Is the fear of losing it enough to keep us from alleviating someone else's suffering? Do we begin to think that our material wealth is what will

save us? Or have we put it into some sort of perspective that supports our belief that it is God alone who cares for us and provides for us? Jesus never told anyone to divest themselves of all their worldly goods just for the sake of impoverishing themselves even when he told the young prince to get rid of all his worldly goods. Jesus told people to give up their worldly goods when those worldly goods became too important to them...when they began to believe that their worldly goods would keep them safe and prevent them from having to deal with disaster.

Perhaps Jesus' message in telling the story of Lazarus and the rich man is to impress upon us that no matter how much we have in material wealth, no matter how much we have in the bank, no matter how healthy our stock portfolio is...none of that represents our salvation. If we lose all of it, we will certainly be uncomfortable and we will probably be frightened and worried, but our salvation belongs to God and has been bought for us with the life of Jesus Christ. Jesus' point in all the parables he told about wealth is that wealth would not save us...not any of us and not in any way. As a matter of fact, our material wealth in this life may actually get in our way in terms of our salvation. What will save us is the love of Jesus Christ and our sincere belief that our material goods in this world should never be as important to us as that love and will never be as powerful.

God has provided for us.

Jesus Christ has paved the way for us by defining the priorities for us and the Holy Spirit has sustained us.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.