

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

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ and may our Lord and Savior sanctify you in the truth, for His word is truth. Amen

First Sunday after Trinity (2021)

Distress on Earth, Comfort in Heaven

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“And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house—for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.’ But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.’ ” (Luke 16:27–31, ESV)

Once, when a woman had anointed Him with an expensive ointment, some complained that the price of the perfume could have been used to aid the poor. But Jesus said, ***“Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you want, you can do good for them. But you will not always have me.” (Mark 14:6–7, ESV)*** Yes, we will always have the poor among us and there is nothing to stop us from doing good for them.

For those of us who are familiar with the parables of Jesus, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus is one that shines a light on our uncompassionate lives. In many respects we are all like the rich man, uncaring, unloving, unsympathetic to the plight of others. It matters not whether our uncaring attitudes are laid bare by our slanderous accusations against another, or whether they are uncovered by our unsympathetic attitude towards the plight of the poor, the sick, or the infirm, the result is the same. We become the rich man in today’s Gospel Reading.

The rich man of the parable dresses in fine clothing, and feasts sumptuously every day. At first glance this seems innocent enough, but as we hear the parable, we realize these attributes credited to the rich man are not attributes which speak of his wealth, but to his excess. His appetite for good things is out of control. He cares for nothing other than his satisfaction, his gluttony, his opulence. So when he leaves his home every morning and passes by poor Lazarus lying at his gate covered with sores, begging for alms, he pays him no attention. It is as if he is walking past a weed or a piece of paper. He can’t be bothered with such a wretch. He is too important to stop and stoop to help this beggar. Let him eat cake.

In contrast to the rich man, Lazarus is a poor, pitiable creature who spends his days lying at the side of the gate of the rich man’s house. Brought there by others, because he is too weak to get there by his own strength, he lies at the gate of the rich man’s house hoping that the rich man or one of his friends will have pity on him and give him something from their table. Like the prodigal son, he longs to be satisfied with the humblest of food. Please, Lazarus cries, let me eat the crumbs from your table. But day after day he is ignored. Lazarus is so pathetic that the dogs who eat the crumbs from the rich man’s table, sense Lazarus’ need and comfort him by licking his sores. The rich man is the perfect vision of the worldly who seek after gold and silver and sumptuous eating, while despising and rejecting the poor and the destitute.

Lazarus is the perfect recipient for mercy. He lies at the gate of the rich man’s house presenting this perfect opportunity for the rich man to be merciful. But to no avail. The lifestyle and

obsessions of the rich man, continually lead him to ignore Lazarus and his need. It is at this point in the parable that our Lord introduces the great reversal.

Lazarus dies and is carried by angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also dies, and his soul languishes in the horrors of hell. Lazarus is overjoyed, feasting sumptuously at the messianic feast, filled with the indescribable ecstasy of heaven, while the rich man suffers an agony unknown on earth as his soul is wrapped in the flames of Satan's inferno. The joy, the sumptuous meals, the riches, the extravagant life of the rich man are left behind when his corpse was laid to rest in dark and dreary grave. And for Lazarus, the pain, the hunger, the loneliness, and the rejection of others, that is also was left behind as his corpse was laid to rest. The brief earthly existence they both experienced are now reversed in their everlasting existence.

You and I cannot begin to imagine the horror of hell, but Jesus gives us a small glimpse when He says that the rich man, who is, ***"in Hades, being in torment . . . lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.'"*** (Luke 16:22–24, ESV) Please Abraham, just the smallest amount of water to bring me a moments relief.

In his earthly life the rich man never thought of giving Lazarus relief. In fact, he never thought of Lazarus at all as he walked around him every day. Even now, as he suffers in hell, he isn't thinking of Lazarus, he is thinking of himself. There is no remorse nor repentance in his request. He is in hell because he lived life as an unrepentant sinner, and he is still unrepentant.

Abraham responds by reminding the rich man how he and Lazarus once lived, saying, ***"Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish."*** (Luke 16:25, ESV) Look, Abraham says, how things are now reversed. Continuing, he says, ***"And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us."*** (Luke 16:26, ESV) Yes, we can see each other, even speak to each other, but there is this impassable chasm between you and us. There is no way for us to breach it.

This is one of the greatest horrors of hell. The souls in hell know there is God. They know He is a benevolent and merciful God, but the separation of heaven and hell means God will never be with them; they are without Him, without His mercy, His grace, His love, and His forgiveness. Their souls have been consigned to an eternity of hopelessness. Think of it, an eternity of suffering magnified by the knowledge that there is One who desired to forgive them, who desired to make them a child of His, who desired to rescue them from such suffering, but they would not. ***"It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."*** (Hebrews 10:31, ESV)

The rich man's wealth became a curse that led to eternal judgment. His heart was arrogant and proud, he had no empathy or sympathy for his fellow man, and now he is suffering the consequence.

Realizing his plight and remembering that he had five brothers still living on earth, living as he once lived, proud, arrogant, unmerciful, and unrepentant lives, the rich man wants Abraham to warn them against such living. Please, he begs, send Lazarus ***"to my father's house . . . so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment."*** (vv. 27-28) But Abraham reminds him, ***"They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them."*** (v. 29)

They have the Scriptures. Moreover, they have rabbis to teach them the Scriptures. This is catechetical language. This is the command our Lord Jesus gave to His apostles at His ascension, when He said teach, ***“them to observe all that I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28:20, ESV)*** A commandment that is sorely ignored today.

Rather than listen to the truth of the Word of God many today fulfill the prophesy of St. Paul, ***“For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.” (2 Timothy 4:3–4, ESV)*** Don’t give me doctrine, give me emotions, give me enthusiasm, give me fanaticism, give me entertainment. Seeking to have their itching ears scratched, seeking emotional comfort from the words of men rather than salvation through Word and Sacrament ministry, many turn away from the truth and chase after lies. Sadly, too many of these will end up being fellow residents with the rich man.

Not to be deterred, the rich man continues, ***“No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.”*** Obviously, if a dead person visits my brothers, they will see the light and repent. But to this Abraham responds, ***“If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.” (vv. 30-31)*** The meaning is clear, many of the Jews, led by obstinate Pharisees have rejected and will continue to reject the resurrection of Jesus. Many today, like the Jews of old, also reject the resurrection of Jesus to their own detriment. Such will also be cell mates with the rich man.

The parable is clear, we show love to our neighbor by being merciful. Our Lord Jesus said, ***“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.” (Matthew 5:7, ESV)*** Again He says, ***“Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.” (Luke 6:30–31, ESV)***

Obviously, the rich man had not heard these words from Jesus. You and I have heard them and much of the world has heard them. But far too few, heed the words of our Lord. We’re too busy. We can’t get involved. If I help this person, I will become obligated to continue to provide for him. They got themselves into the mess they’re in, let them get themselves out. And on and on go the excuses. How quickly we forget that we too get ourselves into messes all the time. Oh, not that we might become beggars on the street, but we get ourselves into trouble all the time without even trying. Think of the sin you commit. Sometimes that sin is a sin of habit, a sin from which you pray you will be rescued, a sin you pray that you will never commit again, but lo and behold, there you are doing the same thing again and find yourself lying in the gutter at Satan’s gate, seeking help.

As you lie there, you hope you would not be treated as was Lazarus, fearing that the One who could help you would merely pass you by. However, your fears are quickly laid to rest because you know He would never pass you by. You know Him who will always stop and stoop to help you, your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It is truly beyond our ability to accurately describe the fullness of the forgiving grace which came into the world in the person of Jesus Christ. He is the compassionate Servant of the Lord who brings good news to the poor, sight to the blind, and liberty to the oppressed. His coming is the beginning of the Year of Jubilee, the divinely appointed amnesty for all mankind.

He knew us even before we knew Him. He knew that we would be conceived in sin, and without the blessed gift of faith in Him we would die in our sin. We would die lying at Satan’s gate. So even before we knew Him, He placed Himself at Satan’s gate, coming to our rescue. He mercifully placed Himself upon the Altar of the Cross pouring out His blood, giving His life to

rescue us from sin, death, and the devil. His death brought us reconciliation and forgiveness from God. Moreover, we become recipients of our Lord's blessed, meritorious work through the gift of faith. By grace we are saved through faith, and through that gift God declares us justified, righteous in His sight for the sake of His only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ. So when we forget who we are and succumb once again to the world, our flesh, and sin and in humble penitence repent and turn to God, crying out for His forgiveness, our Lord Jesus stops, stoops, and intercedes for us with His heavenly Father, begging in our place that His Father would be merciful, gracious, and forgiving to us poor, miserable sinners. Thankfully for us, His request does not go unanswered. His gracious heavenly Father responds, for the sake of His beloved Son, He says to us, "I forgive you all your sins." This forgiveness, this merciful reconciliation is not earned by us, but comes only from God's gracious love because of the merit of His Son, our Mediator and Savior, Jesus Christ, received by us solely through faith in the promise of the Gospel.

With this proclamation we are cleansed from sin, cleansed from what burdens our conscience, and we are filled with gratitude and joy. Although it is not the same joy that Lazarus presently knows that joy is yet for another day. God has paved a path for us leading us to that day when we can be with Lazarus. That path is His gift of faith which leads us to believe in His only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins and life eternal.

So yes, we know that as long as we remain in these bodies, there will be distress, for there is always *Distress on Earth*. There will be pain, suffering, mourning, trouble, tribulations, and disappointments, but these things will not separate us from Christ. And on the day, they lay our bodies in the grave, we will be with Lazarus, in God's heavenly home living eternally in unimaginable ecstasy. We will dwell in the *Comfort of Heaven* for all eternity, feasting sumptuously at the messianic feast. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.