

Sermon Holy Trinity I 2020

June 14th, 2020

Luke 16:19-31

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our merciful Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson previously read.

As we hear this story of Lazarus and the rich man, we see this great contrast between the two men. There is the rich man, clothed in the finest of raiment, enjoying the most sumptuous of fare. But right outside his door is Lazarus. Lazarus the suffering, cursed man without crumbs to eat, and who has the dogs licking his wounds. Then when death comes for both, Lazarus receives the comfort he did not have, and the rich man is denied the comfort he refused to give. As it says, **“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.’”** But Abraham said, **‘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.’** And what could we say is the point of this? I had notes in the margin of my bible that I think said it well: “The mercy he refused to give, he is refused, and the begging he should have done he is now doing.” In other words, there is a call to us to have mercy.

As I say that, I think mercy is something severely lacking in our time and place. In fact, I have been reflecting a lot on this not only this past week for the past few, especially with all of the conversations that have been occurring with regard to race relations. As I say that, this is such a pertinent topic for our time, it requires conversation and application of the Word of God to it. Before I begin, I want to point out that this topic is utterly politicized in our current context. I have no intention of speaking politically. If you feel that I end up doing so, I ask for your forgiveness. My intent is to speak theologically. Sadly, sometimes theological conversation is interpreted for a political position. On the flip side, rightly, theology does need to influence our politics. And as I say this, there is blame and accusation to go around on all sides. In fact, I will likely say something that either strikes your heart or that you may even not agree with as I address this. That’s good. The Law of God should always point out our sin and that will always make us uncomfortable.

To start, it’s imperative that Christians understand the context for our conversations right now. I don’t mean the racial context per se, I’m going to address that a bit more in a minute, but the cultural context. A great deal of the conversation right now is framed according to something called Critical Theory. I read a fascinating

article this week by a gentleman name Neil Shenvi. I had never heard of him before I was pointed to this article, but its insight was fascinating. He made the point that as we look at what's happening in our culture and even in the church we see how more and more people are adopting this underlying understanding of Critical Theory. He also noted that he's witnessed Christian after Christian who has adopted this ultimately moving away from the orthodox teachings of the faith relatively quickly. His intent was to understand why. So he examined it.

His note was to say that if you look at the foundational worldview, that is the foundational understanding of the world, for Christians, the Scriptures tell us we are created by God. They, then tell us that we have fallen into sin. However, they finally tell us that in God's love He has redeemed us, forgiven that sin by the life, death, and resurrection in Jesus, and now we have atonement, salvation, and eternal life in Him. Critical Theory, however, begins with a worldview of oppression. From there, it says that there must be activism, thence will come liberation. So you have creation, fall, and redemption contrasted with oppression, activism, and liberation.

Now to be sure, the concern for oppression is one that all Christians must have. Again, we'll talk more about that in a second. But as we look at this Critical Theory, what it does is to divide everything into organized groups of those who are oppressed and those who oppress. In fact, this can even apply to an individual. They might be a person who is female, but what's called cisgendered. That means they are a woman by sex and see themselves as such. This puts them in the realm of having been oppressed by men, but oppressing those who don't see their gender according to their biological sex. This view of thought stems back to Karl Marx who divided the world into the oppressive economic class of the bourgeoisie and the oppressed economic class of workers, called the proletariat. This division was later applied to cultural categories as other thinkers saw what they called "Cultural Hegemony"—a rule where cultural oppressors set the rules of what was right, or "common sense" for a culture. In other words, the oppressors set the tone for the conversation, so the job of activism is to throw that out so that liberation can happen for the oppressed.

Now, Shenvi in his article, said it's actually not helpful to throw that name of Marxism around for this, but I think it's important to know because Marxism actually inherently says that there will be this constant push and pull between oppressors and oppressed until the end of time. In other words, within its own understanding there will never be peace. I think people need to know that. To Shenvi's point, it's not helpful to throw that up on a Facebook post, but it needs to be understood if not named explicitly.

That said, to the point of this sermon, this division between peoples also leads directly away from mercy.

I watched a great presentation by a gentleman name Voddie Baucham on this this week. It was called “Ethnic Gnosticism.” It’s about an hour long and if you have the time I suggest you watch it, because Dr. Baucham very articulately explains the challenges of our context. And he makes this point: there is not forgiveness. There is not mercy. And yet that’s exactly what we need.

Now as I’ve made this point and am criticizing this Critical Theory for not fostering mercy, the opposite reaction has not been merciful either, and that must be noted. The other side has not responded mercifully in so many ways as well. I think we could say that there has been an utter lack of mercy all around. But again, that’s exactly what we need is mercy.

Now, as I say this, that’s a broader cultural conversation. It’s an application of this Law of mercy to our culture. Maybe it’s applying to you, and if it is, you need to hear it. Our Lord calls to you, be merciful as your Father in Heaven is merciful. But directly, I think we also need to look at ourselves. We are the rich man in so many ways, aren’t we? Consider yourself. That’s something that I have said has been good for me. It has been good for me to reflect upon ways that I have not been as sympathetic as I could be to how our black brothers and sisters, or brothers and sisters of other cultures and colors have experienced life. We had our regional Zoom meeting with other pastors in the district, and one of them, a black man discussed how his sons described experiencing an increased likelihood for being pulled over for not having done something wrong. He was very gracious as he said this, he was very gentle about police as whole—a tone we need to hear more of. He was not vindictive toward them, but he just explained that this really is a problem. That has been good for me to hear that I would be more sympathetic to things I haven’t experienced.

In short, then we need to see how we have been unmerciful to those who are less fortunate that we are. We need to see how we have been unmerciful to those who have less than we do. We need to look at the needs of those around us and see how we could be more caring. We need to repent where we have been racist. And this applies to all, whoever is watching. As Dr. Baucham pointed out either in the presentation I mentioned or elsewhere that I saw, racism is not just an issue for white people. We all need to repent.

You see, we all need to repent because the issue is that we are all sinful. The issue is that in worldly terms, we are the rich man, but in spiritual terms we are Lazarus. Before God, we are poor. We are beggars. We are in dire need.

But Christians, as I mentioned that we are to be merciful as our Father in heaven is merciful, He is indeed abundantly merciful. As we heard in the Epistle Lesson, **we love because He first loved us**. As unmerciful as we are, as undeserving of His mercy as we are, as broken, divided and sinful as we are and have made this world, He has still loved us. He has looked upon your sin, the deepest and most hidden hatred that you have for someone who disagrees with you, or who angers you, or who you might oppress or might experience oppression from, and He loves you. He has carried that sin, that lack of mercy to the cross, bringing it to its death.

You see as I mentioned this contrast between the rich man and Lazarus and the contrast between their opposite fates, this theme in Luke is often called The Great Reversal. You see it more in his Gospel than the others. But there it is. The reversal, the one who has now does not have eternally. The one who does not have now is given eternal comfort. This points to the greatest reversal of all. That's the reversal that shows the mercy of God, the reversal of Jesus.

Jesus is that One who had more than the rich man ever had as He dwelt in the comfort and joy of heaven, as He dwelt in the purity and righteousness that was there. However, in the Greatest Reversal, He willingly sacrificed all of that and entered into the realm of sin. He bore that sin in His body. He gave up riches to have nowhere to lay His head. He, who is life itself, gave up life that we could know the mercy of forgiveness, life, and salvation in His resurrection.

And Christian, you must know that He has given that mercy to you as He has baptized you, as He has continually absolved you, as He has proclaimed that mercy in your ears, and as He has fed you with the very sacrifice which atoned for your sins in His body and blood. Be merciful as He has been merciful. Love because He has loved you.

It's not often that I will bring such a stark command in this close to the end of a sermon, but we all need to hear that command right now. Love because He has loved you. Love without regard for race, for culture, for creed, for sex, gender, or any other classification. To be clear do this in the way that Scripture describes and not in the way that world understands it, that is love in view of the Ten Commandments. But love. Love because our God has loved you. He has loved you and been infinitely merciful to you. He has exchanged His life for yours. There is indeed no greater love. There is indeed no greater mercy. Amen.