



Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. AMEN

Have you heard the one about the 80-year-old husband and wife, who both died at the very same time? When they go to heaven, they were astounded by the spectacular beauty they saw there. Lush, rolling lawns, bright Technicolor flowers, brilliant sunshine, gentle breezes, and the crowning touch, as far as the man was concerned, the most incredible golf course he had ever seen. It was spectacular! With disgust, he looked at his wife, and said to her with disdain in his voice, "You! If it weren't for you and all those bran muffins, we could have been here 20 years ago!"

So, what will heaven be like? If we are Christians, we often times imagine what heaven will be like. Will we be in our own bodies? Yikes, hope not! Will we recognize loved ones or just be surrounded with everyone loving us? Will there truly be no weeping and pain in heaven, but only love and joy? We wonder about these things. We believe the lady at the funeral luncheon who cries out at the end of the meal, "Keep your fork, the best is yet to come."

For the past several weeks we have been reading some of Jesus' parables that reveal what heaven might be like. The Kingdom of heaven is like the woman who lost a silver coin, and when she found it, she threw a party. Or like the favorite story of the prodigal son. The Kingdom of heaven is like the 2nd son who took his inheritance and squandered it and then returned to a father waiting with open arms. If you study scripture, you will find lots of descriptions of heaven. However. . . when Jesus told our Gospel story for today, I am not sure whether he was telling us about heaven or about hell. Since they are exact opposites, I guess if you know one, then you will know the other.

Our story today is about two men. They are very opposite in many ways. And yup, as you heard, one goes to hell, and one goes to heaven. The first man that we meet is the rich man, who is historically called "Dives" because "Dives" means 'rich' in Latin. The rich man wears purple clothing which screams of "money"! Purple was a very expensive color. It came from a snail's blood. Can you imagine how many snails it would take to dye a large piece of fabric? At any rate, that makes it a very expensive color. The rich man, Dives, also wore fine linen and he feasted sumptuously every day. This would be extremely extravagant in Jesus' day and rather unheard of in most circles today. Who parties every single day? Dives is a picture of excess and self-indulgence.

And just outside of his door, we have Lazarus. Couple of things about him: First of all, he is not the Lazarus that Jesus brought back from the dead, the brother of Mary and Martha. But his name, Lazarus is very important, it means "one whom God helps." Also, another interesting tidbit is that this is the only parable that has a named person in it. That in itself signifies that he is important to God and precious in his sight. Yet, Lazarus is on the other end of the spectrum from our rich man. He is poor. He is dressed in sores that immobilize him. He sits outside of the rich man's gate hoping someone will help him. And to top it off a pack of dogs come and lick his sores. Those dogs were the only ones that came to his aid, which was really humiliating as dogs were considered repulsive creatures much unlike the way we see dogs today, as treasures and part of the family. Lazarus is starving, hoping for a few crumbs that even the servants of Dives might throw him.

Truthfully, these two men, Dives and Lazarus could not be more polar opposites. Yet, they have one thing in common that we too share and that is death. Jesus first tells us that the poor man dies and is carried away by angels to be with Abraham, the perfecter and father of our faith. Lazarus receives divine help where human aid was lacking. Being with Abraham, could give him a place of honor at a heavenly banquet. Talk about rags to riches! Then the rich man dies and is buried. He ends up in Hades, says Jesus where he was tormented. Riches to rags. Now let me clarify; being rich does not automatically mean you are going to hell, and if you are poor, you are not automatically going to heaven. Darn, I thought I had that one in my pocket!

There is a huge chasm between these two men both literally and figuratively. Yet in our parable today, Dives asks God to send Lazarus with some cool water to cool his tongue. Still thinking that Lazarus is lower in standing and that he still should be served. Then he asks Abraham to give direction to Lazarus to go to his brothers and warn them about living lives that will lead them to the same place where they too will be tortured. Dives assumes that they will repent of their sins if someone tells them too. Abraham shares the truth that if they have not already listened to Moses and the prophets that they will not repent hearing that news from someone like Lazarus that has come back from the dead.

And so, what do we take away from this parable? It does not really tell us why one went to heaven, and one went to hell. We are left to interpret that for ourselves. I think it is more than just being rich or being poor. It has been a concern of one of our members that when we talk about going to heaven or hell, we ask the question, will we see Hitler in heaven. Good question. I believe that it is not up to us to judge but rather think about the situation. For example, if we knew the exact hour of our death, we could go through life with reckless abandon. Eating and drinking and being merry might sound good if in the final moments of our life, we could repent to God all our sins, no matter how horrific and then claim the promise of eternal life in heaven. We must remember that God knows what is in our hearts, so our confession would need to be sincere as we declare that Jesus is our Lord and Savior. But who on earth, knows when our last breath will be? Not me for sure. When then do we stop the gluttony? When do we stop living the supposed high life caring only for ourselves?

Our parable for today is a warning for us. Jesus is giving us a message, our instruction for living. Those instructions are to go to Scriptures for answers. Today, he is telling us that God's word is enough for faith and repentance. Jesus stresses that twice back-to-back. For in His Word, God not only reveals the selfishness of our lives and thoughts, but also, the selflessness of His Son, Jesus. This is probably the greatest story of rags to riches and riches to rags ever told.

The greatest missionary of all times put it this way: "Though He was in the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Remember hearing this before. Yes, we do, and these Words are for us to follow. We are called to be the hands and feet of Jesus in the world today. No question about it. Jesus paid the price for our sins on the cross. He gave of himself all He had: His life, His blood, in all His humanness. Jesus did this so we could have forgiveness of our sins, an abundant life while here on earth and reap the rich treasure in heaven someday. This is the promise that the rich man did not grasp, but Lazarus did. They had Moses and the Prophets, but folks we are blessed, as we have more. We have not just the Old Testament, but also the New. We have not only the promise of heaven but the true fulfillment of it. We have the Gospel, the power of God for salvation. WOW!

Our Bible is truly the inherent Word of God in Christ Jesus. It is for us to live by today, tangible, and present. Both in preaching and in absolution, we hear the absolute assurance that our sins are forgiven and that we have a place by Abraham in heaven. In the Lord's Supper, we have the Word made visible that touches not just our ears, but also our lips and hearts, when we receive the body and blood of Jesus. In His powerful Word, God gives us Himself. He gives Himself to rescue us from our sin and our self-centeredness. His Word works in us to make us His children now and forever.

It is our job to continue Jesus' work on earth until we are called home to be with Him. There are many many people in our world today, even right here in Park Falls, who need to know Jesus. A reversal of our story comes about as we are now the rich, the wealthy ones, wearing purple robes of royalty, feasting on bread and wine, here today. We are the ones who get God's grace with our true repentance. The poor are at the gate, and we need to help them find Jesus and His loving grace.

In our world today many people do not even know that they need God, but we are here to show them differently not only by our words but by our actions. Because we do have what they are looking for, what they are seeking. The great philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich said, "A Christian is simply one beggar, telling another beggar where to find food."

Where we find food is in Christ Jesus. When we realize what he has done for us, our hearts are filled with joy and compassion. The love of Christ fills us. And we gain a whole community of sisters and brothers. We are rich! Rich in hope. Rich with a community of believers at our side to encourage us to continue in the life God has given us and wants for us.

Blest are we as we have been found and need to help those who are not yet found. We never know what tomorrow will bring. Today is all we have, and as my philosopher Rodney says, "Tomorrow never comes as it is always going to be tomorrow." But we must stay ready, be ready. Our reward is truly in heaven but unlike the guy in our first story, most of us probably don't want it to come too soon and not just to play golf! So, until then keep the faith. God spoke your name at baptism, and he will call you by name when he brings you to His side and into an eternal life of happiness and joy in heaven one day. So, keep preparing to meet God as you seek to help others. We can ensure our future by living into God's kingdom on earth. AMEN