

September 25, 2022

The 16th Sunday after Pentecost

The Lessons: Amos 6:1-7
 Psalm 146
 1 Timothy 6:6-19
 Luke 16:19-31

The Hymns: # 905 *Come, Thou Almighty King*
 # 696 *O God, My Faithful God*
 # 716 *I Walk in Danger All the Way*

The Collect: O God, You are the strength of all who trust in You, and without Your aid we can do no good thing. Grant us the help of Your grace that we may please You in both will and deed; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Sermon:
 "The Rich Man, Lazarus and Us"
 Luke 16:19-31
 Pentecost 19

“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.’”

I. What We Know, and What We Don’t, about the Rich Man and Lazarus

Let’s talk first about what we know about the rich man and Lazarus. In this life, the rich man is very rich. He wears fine linen dyed with that expensive purple dye. He doesn’t just have a feast now and then, but he feasts sumptuously every day. Lazarus, on the other hand, is poor in wealth, health and dignity. He lays at the rich man’s gate, a mess of open sores licked by dogs, desiring just a few crumbs from the table.

Here’s what we know about the death of the rich man and Lazarus. The beggar dies and is carried off to Abraham’s bosom, raised to eternal life in heaven. The rich man dies and finds himself in the torments of hell. Lazarus is in heaven because, by faith, he confesses his sin and trusts in the promised Savior; we deduce this because that is the only way anyone is delivered to heaven. However, look at the rich man in his torment, still suffering the sins which led him there.

First, the rich man apparently believed in salvation by **comfort**. In other words, it seems that he believed that God must favor him because of his prosperity. Even in hell, he is still preoccupied with his own comfort. Tormented by the flames of hell, he asks Abraham to send Lazarus over with a drink of water; rather than repent of his selfishness and self-righteousness, he still expects someone to come and serve him.

Second, the rich man appears to believe in salvation by **label**. He calls Abraham “Father Abraham.” It would seem that he shares the same bad thinking of the Pharisees, who declared to Jesus, “We have Abraham as our father” (Jn. 8:39; cf. Lk. 3:8), believing God loved them because of their bloodline. Faith didn’t matter; genetics did. The rich man believes Abraham will help him—even in hell—because he wears the label, “descendant of Abraham.”

Third, the rich man believes in salvation by **wonders**, not the Word. Although he still shows no repentance for his own sin, the rich man asks that Lazarus be sent to testify to his five brothers still alive, so that they may avoid the torments of hell. Abraham declares that such isn’t necessary because the brothers have Moses and the prophets—they have the Word. But this isn’t good enough for the rich man. He doesn’t believe that the Word will give faith; rather, he believes that the miraculous return of a dead man will convince his brothers to believe. To this, Abraham replies, “If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.” Abraham isn’t really talking about the resurrection of Lazarus, but the resurrection of Jesus. Even when He rises from the dead three days after the crucifixion, his enemies still refuse to believe. Because they have rejected the Word of God, they also reject the Word made flesh.

Here’s what we don’t know about the rich man. We don’t know about his popularity or generosity. Because he ends up in hell, we’re always tempted to see him as an arrogant money-grubber who hoards every dime and makes Scrooge look like a nice guy, but that is something that we bring to the text; it is not something that the Bible tells us. Keep in mind that Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees, and He may well be painting a picture of a man very similar to them. It could well be that he’s a warm and popular man who donates money to all sorts of charitable causes. It could be that, when he fares sumptuously every day, that people are clamoring to join him—not because they’re hoping for a handout, but just because they want to be around such a warm and friendly guy. We simply don’t know what the man is like.

Likewise, we don’t know about the character of Lazarus. Again, because he ends up in heaven, we are tempted to picture him as the beggar with the golden heart, a well-meaning man who is unjustly reduced to rags; and again, this is something that we bring to the text, not what the Bible says. Lazarus may be a beggar because he did some terrible things in his past, and only lately learned repentance. He may be an irritable character who struggles with bitterness and anger every day—but who understands his sin and confesses it. Because we don’t know about the character of the rich man or Lazarus, beware: Too often, this parable is misinterpreted to mean that rich snobs are condemned, while nice poor people go to heaven. But it could be that the nice rich man went to hell while the annoying beggar went to heaven. It’s not about being nice. It’s about repentance and faith. Because Lazarus is forgiven, the Lord knows his name and he lies in the bosom of Abraham. Because the rich man is not forgiven, he is condemned eternally; and as a chilling reminder, we never find out his name because the Lord doesn’t know him. Therefore, we do well to take heed and avoid the sins of the rich man which prevented his faith and repentance.

2. Lessons from the Parable

Remember the three sins of the rich man: salvation by comfort, salvation by label, and salvation by wonders. All three of these sins have a common theme: each was designed to reject the Word of God. Because the rich man measured God’s favor by his comfort, clothes and food, he did not listen to the

Word about his lack of true riches—faith and salvation. Because he was a descendant of Abraham, he saw no need to believe the Word that Abraham believed. And when Abraham told him that the Scriptures (the Law and the Prophets) could save his brothers, the rich man wanted a miraculous sign instead. All three sins resulted in his condemnation. All three sins seek your loss, too.

The last thing that the devil, the world and your own sinful flesh want you to do is to hear and believe the Scriptures. Therefore, they have devised some clever false gods to make you think you are confessing the truth, when you are not.

Like the rich man, you are tempted to the doctrine of “salvation by comfort,” to believe that comfort is a measure of faith. For instance, you are tempted to believe that God loves you if you are comfortable and God hates you if you are not. Beware of this cruel, damning belief. For one thing, it seeks to persuade you that you have no need for forgiveness if you are comfortable. Worse, sooner or later you will face the discomfiting terror of approaching death; and if you believe that God’s love means you feel comfortable, then you will only conclude that God must have no love left for you when you are near death. That leaves you with only despair when you most need the assurance of the Lord’s love for you.

There’s another facet to the false god of comfort, for all false gods desire worship. Thus, Old Adam will tempt you to say that worship is good when it makes you comfortable, when it fits your tastes and preferences; and worship is bad when it makes you uncomfortable. In our world of choices and preferences, this is a very real temptation. A sermon is good if it makes you feel comfortable, bad if it makes you ill at ease; this means that you should avoid that uncomfortable sorrow for your sin. And so, the quality of worship is determined by how much you like it, not by whether or not Christ is there to give forgiveness, life and salvation. Now, when it comes to worship, each one of us will have a preferred set of hymns that we like. Each one of us will wish that the service went a little, or a lot, differently. Each one of us will have a list of certain doctrines that we’d rather not talk or hear about, that make us ill at ease. These are different from person to person. Thus, if comfort is the goal, it will only divide because everyone will have a different comfort level.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, our confession and our worship are not established by what makes us feel comfortable. It is not determined by what will appeal to the youth or the unbelieving visitor. It is determined by the Word of God. It is established by His plan for our salvation. Because we are sinners, we will always be dissatisfied; and because we are sinners, God’s Word ought to make us uncomfortable—that’s what God’s Law is supposed to do. Rather than the false god of self- comfort levels, instead we rejoice that the Lord exposes our sin and grants us the true comfort of forgiveness in Christ.

Like the rich man, you’ll be tempted to believe in “salvation by label,” that your faith is fine because you are a descendant of Abraham. Well, maybe not Abraham. For you and me, the temptation is a variation on the theme, and it goes like this: “I am a Lutheran. Therefore, whatever I believe must be Lutheran; because I, a Lutheran, believe it.” A common corollary is, “And therefore, whatever any Lutheran believes or does must be okay, because it’s a Lutheran doing it.” It’s tempting to believe that whatever any Lutheran preacher says must be true, and need not be verified by Scripture. It’s inviting to believe that whatever a Lutheran church convention approves by 52% must be in accord with the Word of God. It’s tempting to believe that any local custom of a Lutheran congregation must be

acceptable. It's tempting to believe that any song or devotional written by a Lutheran must be doctrinally solid. It's tempting because it makes life so much easier; there's less need to be vigilant, less chance of confrontation. But the facts simply don't support the idea. There are plenty of Lutherans out there who deny that Scripture is God's authoritative Word, who condone abortion and homosexuality. There are Lutherans who deny that Jesus was born of a virgin, or that He rose from the dead. There are Lutherans who believe that the Holy Spirit works to save in ways other than the means of grace, and that the Sacraments are just sort of our own personal twist on Christianity. There are Lutherans who maintain that Muslims worship the one true God, who advocate unionism and syncretism. The label "Lutheran" gets claimed by all sorts of people these days.

This inevitably leads us down the dangerous path of saying, "I believe what my church teaches, though I'm not sure what that is;" or, "I believe my church is wrong, even though I don't know what it teaches."

Like the rich man, you'll be tempted to "salvation by wonders," the desire to look for God's presence and help in what you see, not the Word of God. The comfort level that we spoke of before fits in here, but there are other temptations. Many will judge their faith, and the correctness of their church, by financial gain, numerical growth, health status, and other tangible measures. But once again, such signs are no proof of the Lord's blessing and approval. There are plenty of people who are blessed abundantly by God with material things, and who still do not believe that Christ is risen from the dead.

Time and time again, this text warns us of sins that would distract us from God's Word. It warns us not to trust in our comfort level, label or what we see. It bids us to hear the Word of God and believe it, like the Law that we have heard thus far. It does this for your good, because all of these temptations will fail you, and the Word points you to your Savior who will not fail you. Hear His Gospel now.

Are you afflicted? Troubled? Worried? Sick? Most uncomfortable? Your Old Adam will use these things to convince you that God has no love for you. Your sinful nature will use your exhaustion, hurt and circumstances to say that the Lord is out to get you. But you don't listen to Old Adam, your circumstances or your fatigue to know God's will; instead, you listen to His Word. His Word tells you this: There is no way that God does not love you or is out to get you. Why? Because of Christ. Out of love for you, your Savior was afflicted, beaten and troubled. He bore your sins, sicknesses and infirmities to the cross for you, in your place; there He died with them, taking them to the grave. There, at the cross, God poured out all of His wrath for all of your sin; and if God has poured out all of His wrath for all of your sin, then He has no more wrath to pour out upon you now. He has not run out of love for you, nor is He out to get you. Learn about God from His Word. Cling to His promises, all the more when you are afflicted, because there He promises, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

This is a precious parable, because it seeks to deliver us from all things that would not save us. It bids you not to trust in riches or poverty, comfort, signs and wonders, labels, memberships or anything else for proof of God's grace and love for you. Instead, it calls you back to that life-giving treasure of the Word of God. There, in and by His Word, the Lord gives you forgiveness and faith and eternal life.

There, He declares the comforting news that your salvation is certain—because it is for Jesus' sake, and only for Jesus' sake, that you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.