



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 25, 2016

“The Parable of the Five Brothers”

(Luke 16:19-23)

Rev. David K. Groth

“[Jesus said:] “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side” (Luke 16:19-23).

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**

As a child I liked this story. A rich man was living the high life, practically oblivious that a poor man named Lazarus who was rotting at his gate. Both men die. The rich man wakes up screaming in hell while Lazarus is carried to heaven by the angels of God. As a child this story appealed to my sense of justice.

The makers of the EpiPen have been in the news. EpiPens are a life-saving medicine used by kids with severe allergies to certain foods or bee stings. Every school has to have them, including ours, and a number of our families have to have them on hand all the time. My understanding is that the formula for this drug hasn't changed for over a century, and it has no real competitors, so the company has aggressively jacked up the price from \$57 in 2007 to \$615 today, making this life-saving drug prohibitively expensive for many. And the drug has a shelf life of just one year, so it needs to be purchased again and again and again. Meanwhile, the Wall Street Journal recently reported that the top five managers of that drug firm were paid nearly \$300 million dollars over the past five years. The press is sticking it to them, and congress too, and the spotlight is making those managers squirm, and it feels good to see them squirm. We like it when justice is served. Similarly, this parable can appeal to our sense of justice.

As an adult, I don't get as much pleasure out of this parable as I used to. I know I have a standard of living that makes me wealthy compared to most of the rest of the world. And I know the global village phenomenon has brought Lazarus to my front gate, with his wet, infected sores and his burning hunger. And I know all it would take is a phone call and a credit card, and I would be able to do much more than

I have been doing to ease the suffering of others. So this parable isn't so easy and comfortable and pleasing any more. No, it pricks my ears, and if it doesn't prick your ears you haven't yet heard it.

It's a continuation of last week's Gospel lesson, which Jesus ended by saying, "You cannot serve both God and money." The Pharisees didn't respond well to the statement. Quote, "The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard these things and ridiculed him" (v.14).

The Pharisees were the religious and social elite of the day. They were relatively well-to-do, not wealthy generally, but certainly not poor. And they ridiculed him, and it was their ridicule and their love of money that prompted Jesus to tell this little story.

Poor Lazarus was a pathetic form unloaded every day at the rich man's gate like the morning newspaper. Sick, helpless, unable to work, lying in his own filth, gradually wasting away, so weak he's not even able to shoo away the street dogs that are wanting to lick his open sores.

Lazarus dies. His funeral service is a pathetic affair. It's a bare bones paupers' funeral. No grand music or eulogies. No processional. No luncheon with 7-layer salad. But Lazarus doesn't care one little bit because he's already enjoying the splendors of paradise.

Meanwhile, there lives on the other side of the gate a rich man dressed in purple (exclusively expensive stuff), dining sumptuously every day. The clock keeps ticking though, and the fine purple linen begins to hang about the rich man's thin shoulders. The lovely meals carefully prepared and presented come and go having barely been tasted. There are doctors, the best money can buy, and there are pain-killers, and medicines, but no amount of wealth can postpone the inevitable. So the rich man also dies. Then follows a lavish funeral, well attended, a drop dead gorgeous coffin, an impressive processional to the cemetery followed by one last sumptuous meal on the rich man's dime. All the right people say all the right things, but their words don't

mean a thing because the rich man has already woken up in hell.

(By the way, I've done probably 350 funerals by now, and not once . . . not once have family members worried out loud whether their loved one was in heaven or hell. They were all shoe-ins for eternal bliss, no ifs, ands or buts. You can bet the house on it. But I've not always enjoyed their certainty. Jesus said, "Enter through the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. But the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to eternal life, and those who find it are few." To me it seems like we've reversed those words. Now everyone gets into heaven because the path is so wide and so easy, and because grace is so cheap.)

In any case, the rich man in the parable doesn't make the cut. He wakes up in hell.

Now keep your eyes on those Pharisees who ridiculed Jesus. Remember the story is for them . . . initially. It's not a condemnation of wealthy people. It's a sharp commentary on a group of people who loved wealth and, at the same time were content to believe that people who were poor or sick deserved to be poor or sick. The Pharisees had a very simplistic way of thinking about the world. If you had it, you deserved it. Whether wealth or poverty, health or illness, if you had it, you deserved it. And truth be told many of us hang on to those simplistic assumptions. Poor people are usually poor because of their poor decisions, right, or because they're lazy, indolent. But the world isn't quite so simple, and Jesus is not going to let the Pharisees (or us) get away with that nonsense. He knows we are deeply impressed with the rich and powerful, so in the parable he sends this rich man straight to hell to teach us that wealth will not help us before God, and, in the end, may even hinder us. And he knows we're not so much impressed with the poor, and so he has angels gently, reverently carrying Lazarus up to heaven.

Now, remember Scripture interprets Scripture. The only way anyone gets into heaven is by grace through faith. And the only way anyone gets into hell is by unbelief.

The rich man is not in hell because of his wealth. And he's not in hell because of his neglect of Lazarus. He's in hell because of his unbelief. Maybe his wealth encouraged unbelief. After all, it's hard to pray for daily bread when long ago you stashed away enough wealth to cover your daily bread for two or three life times. And his neglect of Lazarus is only evidence of his unbelief, because where there is faith there will always be good works. Where there is faith there will always be works of mercy.

And Lazarus is not in heaven because of his poverty. Poverty is no free pass into paradise. In fact, the poor man can be just as tough a nut to crack for the Lord as the rich man. Lazarus gets into heaven the only way anyone else gets into heaven: by grace through faith.

Though the rich man is in hell, he still assumes he can order people around. So he calls up to heaven and tells Abraham to send Lazarus down to hell that he might, quote, "dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame." Abraham refuses, and reminds the rich man he's already had a full measure of pleasures on earth, and besides, between us and you there is a great chasm that has been fixed. There's no going back and forth.

Perhaps for the first time, the rich man starts worrying about others for a change. Specifically, he's thinking about his five brothers. He's hoping they can get their act together before it's too late. "Send someone from the dead" he tells Abraham, to warn them. That's all the rich man is asking for. It's not a big request. Just send someone to startle and scare his brothers into the faith. But again, Abraham says, "There's no more wheeling and dealing for you. You're done. Forget about it." "They have Moses and the Prophets: let them listen to them." "No, father Abraham!" the rich man says. "All that Bible stuff . . . it's not enough! But if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent." Abraham stands firm. "If they do not

listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.”

As a child I remember thinking, “I disagree. A dead man talking to me would sure make it easier for me repent.” It took me a while to understand God doesn’t want fearful acquiescence. He wants our faith, our trust. He doesn’t want us coming to him quivering with fear, but rather as a dear child comes to a loving Father.

The rich man’s fate is sealed. It cannot be changed. But there’s still time for his five brothers, isn’t there? They haven’t died yet. And they are the key to the correct understanding of this parable. Though mentioned only in passing, this parable is really about them. They represent every living person on this planet. The Word is right underneath our noses. Those who don’t yet believe still have opportunity to hear and believe if only they stop resisting the Holy Spirit. But if they reject God’s Word they will suffer the same fate as the rich man.

This parable then is about hearing the good news and receiving it by faith before it is too late. It’s about getting that word out to your brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews, co-workers, friends and neighbors, before it’s too late. It’s the Word that makes us wise unto salvation (2 Tim. 3:16). In Isaiah God says his Word is like rain. It waters “the earth, making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater.”

Let them listen to Moses and the Prophets. This isn’t just an invitation. It’s a promise. “Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God” (Rom. 10:17).

Don’t wait for some other extraordinary confirmation. God is not going to open up the heavens and perform a miracle for you, to stun you or anyone else out of lackluster, tepid, half-hearted faith. He’s not going to bring you to your knees with an extraordinary vision of him or of heaven. He wants faith, not acquiescence. He wants trust, not fear. They have the Word. “Let them listen to it.”

It’s all we have, and it’s all we need. Nothing more, nothing less. Not a visit from the dead. Not a personal guru

in India. Not a sign or coincidence or close call that will knock your socks off. We have the Word of God, and it is enough. It does every day what a visitor from the dead could never do. It enkindles faith and trust and quiet joy. Even from childhood you have known the holy Scriptures which are able to make you wise unto salvation (2 Tim. 3:15).

Finally, this parable reminds us before God, we are all beggars, as helpless and desperate as Lazarus sitting out there by the gate. We have nothing to offer him but our filth and sin and sickness. We can't help ourselves. Spiritually, we can't pull ourselves up out of our own filth and do the work required to earn salvation. Only God can help us. And the good news is he has helped us. Unlike the rich man who did nothing for Lazarus, God has done everything for us. In Jesus Christ, God has reached out to us. He has cleansed us with his forgiveness. He has bound up our wounds with his love. He has fed us sumptuously with his body and blood, and lifted us up with his strong arms. Whether rich or poor, he desires that all should be saved. From the cross God has loved us with an everlasting love, and wants nothing more than for the angels to carry us up to heaven. Therefore precious in his sight is the death of his saints. Thanks be to God. Amen.

