

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Lena, IL - 25 September 2022**  
**Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Year C - Lectionary 26**

**1st Reading: *Amos 6:1a, 4-7***

**Psalm: 146**

**2nd Reading: *1 Timothy 6:6-19***

**Gospel: *Luke 15:1-10***

**Sermon - *Vicar Thomas J. Mosbø***

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

We all like to hear stories, whether they are read to us, or we watch a play on stage, on the TV, or in the movie theatre. Who are the people in this story? What are they going to do? And what is going to happen to them? But sometimes the best way to hear a story is to have someone tell it to us, maybe while we are gathered around a cozy fireplace, sipping warm cups of cocoa while the storyteller engages us, looking us in the eye, and seeing what our reactions are.

Jesus loved to tell stories, and he often got quite a reaction from his audiences. He comes to us this morning with an interesting one about a rich man and a particular poor man named Lazarus. Now right off the bat that makes this story different from every other story Jesus ever told. Of all his parables, this is the only one where Jesus gives us a name for one of the characters. Why did he do that? Let's see if we can figure that out.

He starts out by describing the rich man: he "was dressed in purple and fine linen and feasted sumptuously every day". Sounds like a good life. We don't know how he became wealthy, whether he inherited his money or worked hard for it, but he was now able to take it easy, relax, and enjoy the blessings of life. Nothing wrong with that.

But then there's this other man, Lazarus. Jesus tells us that "at the [rich man's] gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores." Pretty miserable. But again, we don't even know why Lazarus was poor. Was he born poor? Was he just lazy? Had he squandered all his money in bad business deals? Was he unable to work because of this disease he had, so that he was covered in sores? We don't know if he was a good man or a bad man.

We only know that he wished he could live just from the wasted food that fell from the rich man's table, and we know that even the dogs would come and lick his sores. Now in those days, dogs weren't really pets that were taken care of, they were scavengers. So the dogs who were licking Lazarus's sores weren't trying to soothe him, they were trying to get what nourishment they could from the blood oozing from his sores. Not a pretty picture by any means.

And that's all the background we get before the story moves on. Then poor old Lazarus dies. No surprise there, given his condition. But there is a bit of a surprise. Jesus tells us that Lazarus "was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham." Abraham, of course, was the father of all those who believe in the true God, the one with whom God had made a covenant that his offspring would be blessed. And now here was one poor descendant of Abraham, one of millions, but this one was carried by angels to be with Abraham himself.

But then comes the real surprise in the story. The rich man died, too. Maybe he choked on a drumstick, or maybe he was just old, but like everyone else in the world, he died. And he was buried. No angels, no flight to Abraham's side. He died and was buried, and found himself in Hades, the land of the dead, known as Sheol in the Old Testament. It was thought to be a shadowy existence, where one is not really alive, but not gone altogether. And when the promise of resurrection was given in the later books of the Old Testament, and throughout the New, it was considered to be the place of waiting for the resurrection. And here was the rich man, waiting in torment.

And now we get a real picture of what this man's character was like, even if we might have suspected it all along. He can see Lazarus in Abraham's arms, and calls out to Abraham: "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames." So there it is. He had never given a thought for Lazarus during the time that he lay at his gate, starving and suffering from his sores. And now, he thought it was his own right to make Lazarus come to him and bring him a bit of water. Other people were there just to make him comfortable. They had no value apart from this.

But Abraham answers the rich man: "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony." Notice that Abraham does recognise the rich man as one of his descendants, calling him "Child", but he seems to have forfeited the blessings God had promised Abraham for his children by his selfish and unloving attitude.

And here we might be tempted to say that the moral of the story is that good people go to heaven and bad people go to hell, but that isn't really what Jesus is saying here, nor is that what Judaism or Christianity really teach.

The God of Judaism, the God of Christianity, made a covenant with Abraham, saying that “I have saved you by my grace, and will bless you and your people, but you must now live by my covenant, or you are rejecting that blessing.” This God saved the people of Israel when Moses led them through the waters of the Red Sea, and only after they had been saved, he gave them the laws they were to live by. And ultimately it is Jesus who saves us all by his grace, but he then asks us to live out that salvation by loving and caring for others.

Lazarus was saved by God’s grace, and we know nothing about whether he was good or bad. But the rich man, who as a child of Abraham was offered salvation, was rejecting God’s salvation, rejecting God’s blessing, by treating others as those who must serve him, instead of being willing to serve and help others. He had made himself prosperous, and we can see this now in his attitude. He had made a name for himself. And to him, Lazarus had been a nameless nobody, inconveniently lying at his gate, but now it would be convenient for Lazarus to bring him a drink of water.

So this is the great irony in this story. The rich man, who thought he was great, and had made himself a name, remains nameless. Instead, it is the poor, insignificant man, who is the only person in any of Jesus’ parables to be given a name: Lazarus, which means “God will help”. The rich man could have helped Lazarus, but he didn’t. Instead, God came to his aid and saved him, not because of anything Lazarus had done, but simply because of God’s grace.

And lest we think that it was the rich man’s wealth that was the problem, let us remember that there is another Lazarus in the New Testament, the brother of Mary and Martha, and Mary and Martha were themselves quite rich, but they used their wealth to help Jesus with his ministry instead of using it to live luxuriously to the detriment of others. We know that they did not ignore the poor at their gate

We hear about the dangers of using our wealth selfishly in both of our other readings this morning as well. Amos warns those whose riches have made them complacent that:

<sup>4</sup>Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory,  
and lounge on their couches,  
and eat lambs from the flock,  
<sup>6</sup>who drink wine from bowls,  
and anoint themselves with the finest oils,  
but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!

And Paul warns us that “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith.” If we put our money ahead of God, not caring about what God asks of us, then we are in danger of rejecting God altogether. But instead, Paul says, “As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share.”

The rich man in Jesus’ parable did learn this lesson, but he learned it too late. He finally does care about others, his own brothers, and he asks Abraham: “father, I beg you to send [Lazarus] to my father’s house—for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.”<sup>29</sup> Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’

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 listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’ ”

And, of course, this is the final tragedy of this story. Lazarus, the real Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, was raised from the dead by Jesus, but it didn’t make a bit of difference to the people in Jesus’ day who trusted in themselves and in their own riches. And even more importantly, Jesus himself rose from the dead, enabling all of us to be taken by angels to be with Abraham, and with all those who have died in the Lord. So let us, whether rich or poor, well known or feeling nameless, be sure that we are among those who are convinced by his resurrection, who accept his grace, and share his love and mercy with all those around us.

Amen!

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