



Sermon for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 21
Rev. Jonathan Stepp
September 29, 2019

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

A man was completely bankrupt and struggling to find even enough money to buy food – much less pay all his outstanding bills. As he walked down the street he saw a Baptist Church and in desperation he went in, knelt, and prayed “God, please let me win the lottery.” A week went by and nothing happened. So he walked across the street to the Methodist Church and prayed again, “God, please, I need money, give me a break and help me win the lottery.” Still nothing happened for another week. Finally, in desperation, he climbed the hill at the edge of downtown where the Episcopal Church stood. He went inside, knelt at the communion rail, and cried out “O Lord, please, I need to win the lottery.” Just then a voice boomed from heaven, “my dear boy, for pete’s sake, go and buy a lottery ticket!”

Last Sunday I said that week’s parable – the story of the Unjust Manager – was the most difficult parable in the gospels, but I have to admit that it is probably tied with our story today for that dubious honor. Today’s parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man is quite difficult to read if we really stop and let it sink in.

To cut right to the heart of the matter: today’s story is difficult because of its extraordinary harshness. A rich man goes to hell for not helping a homeless man in need of health care. Let that sink in for a moment. There’s no question raised as to whether he has accepted Christ as his savior, there’s no discussion about whether he’s baptized or whether he died in a state of grace having made a last confession. He ignores a man who needs a home, food, and health care, and he ends up in hell.

To understand why Jesus speaks with such harshness here I think it might be helpful to remind ourselves of what he’s been telling us these last few weeks. We heard about the Shepherd who seeks the lost sheep and the woman who seeks the lost coin, we were reminded of the Unjust Father who cares more about relationship than rules and we heard the story of the Unjust Manager who ignores our carefully constructed rules of ac-

counting. Jesus has shown us that God is more concerned about loving relationship than following our rules for what we think is fair.

That's why Jesus said last week that we can't serve God and wealth. Building up one's store of money, and the power that comes with it, depends on the rigorous application of the law and the following of rules to a tee. But building up the Kingdom of God requires mercy, compassion, and a consuming desire to bring all of God's children home to him. That is where God's heart is. God loves us so passionately that he will stop at nothing to bring us home to himself. But today we see a rich man who will do nothing to bring his brother home.

The fact that Lazarus and the Rich Man are spiritual brothers is, I believe, the key to this parable. Jesus wants to drive home to us the truth that we are all in this together. Because God has, in Christ, brought all of humanity into the loving, relational life of the Trinity, there is no such thing as a human being that is not our brother or sister. Regardless of race, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, economic status, or even supposed state of sinfulness, we are all part of God's family. When the Rich Man walked past Lazarus and ignored his suffering he was walking past his own brother, a member of his own family – a member of the human family, adopted as God's child. Jesus is warning us that callous disregard for others will put us so far outside the life and heart of God that it's like a giant chasm the size of the grand canyon has opened between us and God.

The temptation we all face in interacting with others who are like Lazarus is the temptation to think they are like the man in the joke: that there's something they should be doing that they're not doing and that's why they are struggling with poverty, homelessness, or lack of health insurance. We can probably imagine the kind of excuses and judgements the Rich Man made each day as he walked past Lazarus, because what he might have said are the things that we have all heard others say and the things that we have sometimes said ourselves. "Why doesn't Lazarus get a job?" "Lazarus needs to pull himself up by his bootstraps." "It wouldn't be fair for me to take money away from providing food, shelter, and health care for my family and give it to Lazarus." And so on.

But Jesus is challenging us to begin to think like God. What happens when we stop asking "what are the rules?" or "what's fair?" and we start asking "how can I help my beloved brother Lazarus?" "How can I love Lazarus as God loves Lazarus?"

We live in a nation that is not only the wealthiest nation in the world, it is the wealthiest nation in the history of humanity. We Americans are the ones who dress in purple and fine linen and feast sumptuously every day while millions of our brothers and sisters go without the basic necessities of life – from housing, to food, to adequate health care. Jesus is calling us to stop making excuses, to stop asking questions rules and regulations, and start asking ourselves, “how can love others as God loves them?”

I believe that’s why Jesus tells us this hard and harsh story. Not because he wants us to fall into despair or fear about some far off judgment day but because he wants to open our eyes so that we can see. He wants to open our eyes to see the world, to see our fellow humanity, as God sees them, as God knows them, and as God loves them.

As this Sunday’s collect says, God declares his almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity. May he grant us the fullness of his grace, that we also may learn to show mercy and may thereby become partakers of his heavenly treasure, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.