

Proper 21C (Pentecost 18) , 2010

Text: Luke 16:19-31

Title: The Great Reversal

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We like revenge. We like to see people get what's coming to them. We like it when the rich, evil people get what they deserve. We like to see Ebenezer Scrooge tormented by ghosts, we like it when Lindsay Lohan ends up in jail. We like it when the rich movie stars and celebrities and athletes take a fall from grace and end up all washed up.

And so we like the story Jesus tells today. Tell me you didn't take at least some pleasure when you heard what happened to the rich man in today's text. Tell me you didn't feel satisfied that he was in torment for the way he lived his life.

It's easy to pick on the greedy rich people, because you don't think of yourself as rich and you don't think of yourself as greedy. There's always someone richer and someone greedier than you are.

But this story is about more than just rich and poor. It's about more than just revenge and the reversal of fortunes. It's about repentance and faith. It's about life and resurrection.

So why did the rich man go to hell? The reason the rich man ends up in hell is not because he was rich. There are plenty of rich folks in the Bible who are saved. Just look at Abraham. Abraham was very wealthy- he had plenty of livestock, he had many servants, he even commanded his own private army. But rich Abraham did not end up in hell; he was in heaven with the angels. So the rich man didn't go to hell just because he was rich.

The reason why the rich man went to hell was because he ignored God's Word. Through Moses and the prophets God had made His law clear. Moses said, "Love your neighbor as yourself." The prophets warned against greed and neglect for the poor. We heard the Amos warn the rich that if they didn't repent, the Lord would send them into exile.

The rich man valued and loved and trusted his riches more than he trusted God. He was afraid to give away his wealth and to help Lazarus, because he didn't trust God to take care of him.

Paul's words to Timothy speak directly to this point, "But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. <sup>10</sup>For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs."

The problem is not being rich, it's desiring to be rich. The problem is not having money, it's loving money.

And it doesn't matter if you're rich, poor, or somewhere in the middle- if you love money more than you love your neighbor- you're in trouble. If you trust money more than you trust God you will go to hell, just like the rich man in today's story.

It's a harsh message, and something we don't like to hear. But for your own good, you need to hear it.

The rich man didn't listen to Moses, he didn't listen to the prophets and look what happened to him.

So the rich man didn't go to hell because he was rich, and likewise the poor man, Lazarus, didn't go to heaven because he was poor.

Now Jesus doesn't tell us much about Lazarus except that he had a rough life. He received no mercy in this life. He was poor, he was sick, and he was lonely. In life he only received the bad things.

But the Lord had mercy on him in death and brought him home to Abraham's side. In death he finally received comfort.

This is good news for you. In life you may feel like Lazarus. Nothing seems to go right.

Maybe it's financial- you've lost a job or you're watching your savings and retirement dwindle away, and you never seem to be able to catch a break. No matter how hard you try, you never seem to have enough money even to pay for the basic bills.

Maybe it's your health- you seem to spend your life in and out of doctor's offices. As soon as you have one problem solved, another crops up. You're constantly in pain, none of the medications seem to do any good, and you're about ready to just give up.

Maybe it's your relationships- you've grown apart from many of your friends and family. Maybe you've been divorced or had relationships end badly. You feel alone and unloved and wonder if anyone really, truly cares for you.

When you find yourself in these places: poor, sick, and alone like Lazarus, you are tempted to do things in the way of the rich man- to put yourself first and become selfish- to do whatever it takes to make it in this world, to become greedy and self-centered and self-pitying.

The answer is not to look to yourself but to God's word. In God's Word, you will find not only God's Law, accusing you and condemning you, but also His gospel, the good news, with promises of good things.

In the gospel, you will hear that even though you are poor in this life, that you have riches in heaven far better than anything you will experience here on earth.

You will hear that even though you are sick and in pain today, that the Lord will put an end to sickness and pain and even death itself in the new creation.

You will hear that even though you feel alone and unloved, that the Lord loves you, and is with you, and has made you His child, and He will never leave you or forsake you.

All of these gifts are yours through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ was rich, far richer than the rich man in today's story. And yet for your sake He became poor. Jesus was son of a homeless couple, laid in a feed trough because there was no room for them in the inn. He had no place to lay his head.

Jesus Christ was life, the immortal Son of God, begotten from all eternity. And yet for your sake He endured pain and suffering, he was tortured and died, nailed to a cross for you.

Jesus Christ was one with His heavenly Father, and yet for your sake He was forsaken and abandoned. He died alone. Jesus took upon Himself your sins, and the separation that goes along with them.

Jesus was rich, full of life, and was loved- all the marks of success, and for your sake, Jesus became rich, dead, and forsaken.

Yet, like the poor man in today's story, Jesus was vindicated in His death. He was raised from the dead and ascended to heaven.

Abraham did not send Lazarus back from the dead, but Jesus is risen from the dead.. He is here with us today.

You not only have Moses and the prophets, but you have Jesus Christ, risen, ascended and glorified for you.

Some people still will not listen. Abraham's words to the rich man ring true. There are people who continue to reject Jesus, even though He is risen from the dead.

But not you, you are here to listen. Listen to God's Word- Old Testament and New. Come to hear it proclaimed in the Divine Service.

Study it with your brothers and sisters in Bible Class in about half an hour.

Read and meditate upon it in your home with your family.

And as you hear God's word, the Holy Spirit will create Faith in heart. The Holy Spirit will change you from being a selfish rich person who loves only himself, to a Lazarus, with hands open, ready to receive.

You may receive good things in this life, and again you may not. Jesus does not promise that you will be rich and wealthy and successful if you follow Him. In fact you can expect the opposite. You can expect to be poor, to suffer and to be despise.

But when you die, the holy angels will bear you to Abraham's side, and there you will receive all the good things that Jesus Christ has won for you.