

The First Sunday in Angels' Tide, September 25, 2022

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminster, Massachusetts

Those Whom God Helps

Luke 16:19–31

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

From our Gospel reading: **Abraham said to the rich man, 'Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish (v 25).**

If you're familiar with the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, then I'm sure you know the song "If I were a rich man." Tevya, the main character, is a poor farmer who dreams of riches, honor, and an easier life. He would trade places with a wealthy man in a heartbeat, if he could. Would you?

But what about with a poor person? No one wants Tevya's life—a life of poverty and hardship. No one goes around singing, "If I were a poor man." We dream of a better life, an easier life, not a worse one. Even St. Mary, our Lord's mother, echoes this in her Magnificat. She says of her God, "**He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent empty away**" (Lk 1:53). We long for the great reversal that will fill us and our lives with those good things!

I. The Contrast in This Life

[Jesus said:] "**There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores (vv 19–21).**

Given the choice, which of these two lives would you rather have? Eleven out of ten times, it would be the rich man's. We envy what he has, don't we? We'd take a virtual tour of his house and dream about living in it, just like we may have done when Tom Brady's New England house went on the market. We look through catalogs and imagine ourselves in fine clothing. We watch the food shows and picture feasting at those tables. We wonder what it would be like to rub shoulders with the rich and famous, to go to their events, to attend their parties and social gatherings. We peek through the windows with longing. It doesn't take too much arm twisting to imagine

living that life *every day*. The fact is we don't daydream about getting a taste of that life just for an hour or two or a couple of days. The daydream is about having that life—the Bezos, Buffett, Gates, Zuckerberg life—in full, for the rest of life, until we die. That's the "American dream," isn't it?

There was a certain rich man . . . and—what a contrast!—a poor man named Lazarus.

Oh, yeah, him. Maybe you'd barely noticed him. Or had already forgotten about him with those daydreams of bigger and better. He's easy to ignore, at least once you're past the rich man's gate and up to the windows. No one envies the poor man. No one imagines what his life is like. Poor Lazarus with no house, no home. No one takes a virtual tour of a refugee camp, a tent city, or a cardboard box. Since he gets dropped by the gate, he's probably a cripple, too. He relies on the help of others for survival. No food, though he doesn't want much. He'd be satisfied with the measliest, humblest scraps from the rich guy's table, or from yours. Just crumbs, the pods eaten by the pigs. And no clothing—at least none worthy of mention. But he is covered in terrible sores. People pass him by every day. The feasting friends come and go and pay little attention to him. Only the dogs notice him—for whatever that's worth. Do their licks add to his suffering or provide some relief? I'm not sure.

Then the rich man and Lazarus went the way of all flesh. **The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried** (v 22). Even in death, there's a difference. Poor Lazarus doesn't get the dignity of a proper burial, like the rich man does. But hold on to that bit about the angels come to bear him home to Abram's bosom.

So I ask again: Given the choice, which of these two lives would you rather have? We envy the rich guy, do we? We would mirror our lives after his, would we? Right down to his out-of-control feasting and misuse of riches and ignoring and mistreating the poor guy at the gate? It's not just what he did. It's what he failed to do. We're attracted to appearances, to externals, but what about the state of his heart, his soul, his standing before almighty God? Do we stop to consider those things? Maybe we think that we'd do better than him. Live more moderately. Consider the poor. Use our riches for good. Maybe we would. But do we do that now with what we have? Do you even know where Lazarus is lying? Whom could you help in this life?

II. The Contrast in the Next Life

So, rich man or poor man? Consider what comes next: **"In Hades, being in torment, [the rich man] lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side.**

And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.’ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us’” (vv 23–26).

Now—in the next life—the tables are finally turned. Now—in the world to come—the great reversal takes place. Now are fulfilled the blessings and woes spoken by Jesus: **“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. . . . But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation”** (Lk 6:20, 24).

Whose life do you want now? The rich man had it all in this world—had plenty of good things. He has nothing in the world to come. He’s in the torment of hell. Distant from God, from Abraham, even from Lazarus, all of whom He’d forgotten and ignored in this life. In need of mercy, but beyond mercy’s reach. Seeking a drop of water where there is none. In flames and anguish. What of his riches now and how he used them? What of the life he spent in fancy clothes and splendid feasting? It may be cliché but it’s true: You can’t take it with you. Proud in this world; in hell, a beggar.

And then Lazarus. The very fact that he has a name tells us something. His name means “one whom God helps.” The Good Shepherd knows his sheep, his poor sheep, and calls them by name, and they follow him. No longer alone with the dogs. He’s now with Abraham. No longer begging scraps. Now he’s at the feast. No longer homeless or naked or hungry or ill. All the bad things he had in this life are gone. In heaven, he receives comfort. Nothing can diminish or take away his joy.

Two vastly different lives. Two vastly different eternities. It’s appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment (Heb 9:27). There’s no crossing over between heaven and hell.

III. How to Be Prepared

What about for those who are still living? What about for us?

“And [the rich man] said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house—for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.’ But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ And 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 hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead’” (vv 27–31).

The point isn't that the rich go to hell and the poor go to heaven. Jesus here doesn't condemn wealth or the use of wealth. He condemns the misuse of wealth—the misuse of wealth of whatever size. The danger of wealth is one of the things that Scripture speaks of often. It's why St. Paul tells Timothy that pastors shouldn't be lovers of money and other servants of the church shouldn't be greedy for dishonest gain. If you ever see that in my life, please call me out for that. Tell me. The great reversal that's needed isn't for the rich to become poor and the poor to become rich. The great reversal that's truly needed for that rich man and for his brothers and for us today isn't in our outward circumstances. It's the great reversal in our hearts—so that our hearts aren't attached to the things of this world but are attached to the One who is of the life of the world to come.

That's why God has given us His word—Moses and the prophets, the Old Testament Scriptures. That our hearts would not be fixed on the wealth of this world but on the treasures of heaven, we gather to hear that word every Sunday, week after week. Moses and the prophets condemn the love of money and pride in wealth. Moses and the prophets also proclaim God's care and help for the lowly and downtrodden, especially the promise of the Savior. This Word of God is what enables to live wisely in this life, and it prepares us for the life to come. Let us desire not the riches of the rich man but let us seek, desire, and receive the grace and mercy given to the poor man. For God remembers the mercy **He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever** (Lk 1:54–55). He shows **the mercy promised to our fathers** and remembers **his holy covenant, the oath that He swore to our father Abraham, that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days** (Lk 1:72–75).

Where does this mercy of God come from? The mercy of God comes from the one Man who chose to trade places with the poor. The mercy of God comes from the one Man who sang the song that Tevya and you and I would never sing—if I were a poor man. That mercy comes through Jesus Christ. He took more than a virtual tour of the gate where poor Lazarus lay. He came in the flesh. He chose to go from feasting to famine. He chose to go from the splendor of heaven to no house, no home, and no place to lay His head. He chose to lay down His royal robe to wear the nakedness and shame of the cross. What we would never imagine doing, He did. He chose death with the poor man. He chose to be buried. And on the third day He really did rise from the dead. Our Lord Jesus Christ chose to come to our place, where we poor beggars—poor with our sin and

the sickness inherited from Adam—lie in great need. He said, “I’ll take your place. You have Mine.”

Your Lord comes to you again today saying the same thing. He comes to you again with His forgiveness. He has seen you by the gate and said, “I have what you need.” Though your life may be one of poverty here, he promises you the treasures and richness of heaven to come. And if you do have wealth here, He invites you to hold that wealth loosely as you cling to Him. He also invites us to lift our eyes not just to what lies ahead but to the world around us, to look for the neighbors in need. Now is the time to be content with what we have and to hold our possessions loosely, for we know what has been promised and is ours in Christ. You don’t have to be rich to be neighborly and kind. Now is the time for us by Christ and by His crucifixion to cross over from hell with the rich man to heaven with poor Lazarus. Now is the time to listen to Moses and the Prophets, yes, to all the Scriptures. Now is the time for us to look to the One who has come back from the dead and who has life for us. In this way, we will, like Lazarus, be true sons of Abraham. We will receive what he was promised. We will recline at table with Abraham (Mt 8:11). We will be those whom God helps forever!

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7