

TRINITY I (JUNE 6, 2021) – LUKE 16:19-31

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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

Amen.

“[the rich man] called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’ But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’” Thus far our text.

There once was a man who lived all alone, because he thought that he would be safer that way. If no one was around him, and he kept his sphere of influence small, then no one would be able to harm him. So, he became a recluse, and lived out in the wilderness, far from any other people. He only journeyed to the nearest store, about 10 miles away, once a month or so to get supplies for his food and clothing, and never associated with anyone on these trips besides the clerk in the store. The clerk marveled one day at the independence of this man, and remarked about it to him. His reply was simple – “If I don’t let anyone close to me, then they can’t hurt me or try to change me.” Such self-centeredness is a symptom of the world that we live in today. Few of us go to such extremes as to become hermits; however, our closed garage doors and empty front

porches speak much louder than our protestations to the contrary. We say that we like to spend time with others; however, it has to be on our terms. That's the way that we are – everything has to be on our terms! We must remember, however, that our own terms are often clouded by the sinful world that we live in. If we don't depend on anyone else for anything in life, we can become so self-centered that we forget even about God. We can begin to think that we can get by without His aid on a daily basis, and trust in our own strength and intellect to survive. This is how it was for the rich man in our parable. He did not think that he needed God; he didn't need anything but his own riches. This served him well in this life. If we concentrate on it, and make it our life-long goal, we can probably succeed to the point that we don't need any more earthly possessions. However, in the long run, in the heavenly realms, we cannot do it all ourselves. Our only hope is in the mercy and love of our heavenly Father, who desires us to be saved. Our good works will not merit us heaven; our own strength will not get us there. To forget about God, and only worry about serving our own desires, will get us only to the point of the rich man, and be in torment for eternity, rather than in luxury. This parable is a strong warning about what earthly riches can do for our eternal condition, and is illustrative of the other parable about riches and a camel going through the eye of a needle!

As I said last week, riches do not ALWAYS condemn us to eternal death in torment. Riches can be used for good purposes, and further God's kingdom. Many others have used riches to help out others in need, and to spread the Gospel of Christ to the world. Think, for example of all those who support the missions of the church with private donations, both at the local and Synod levels. Remember the LWML ladies, who

volunteer their time and their talents to serving others both in this congregation and the church at large.

It was not because the man was rich that he was eternally condemned. Rather, the reason that the man was condemned was because he thought that he didn't need God anymore. Wealth can sometimes corrupt us in this way. If anything that we could ever need or want is just a credit-card swipe or a pen stroke on a check away, then it is easy to translate this into a perceived complete independence from God. If we don't need anyone in this world to provide for us and our needs, or help us out, it is not a far stretch to think that we don't need God, either. This complete and utter refusal to believe in the merits of Christ until death is the sin against the Holy Spirit that condemns us; it is the only unpardonable sin. God doesn't want to send us to be with the devil, or to eternal torment. Even though He would be justified in writing each and every one of us off to our sinful desires, He doesn't want to do this. His love conquers our sins, and restores us to a right relationship with Him. He didn't have to send His Son to die for our sins. He didn't have to give us the Word and the Sacraments to teach us, nourish us, and sustain us in faith toward Him. But, His love causes Him to keep on working in us until the end of time.

But, if we refuse to believe in Him, and this persists until our earthly death, then He has no choice. He cannot abide with sin in heaven – if we don't confess our sins, then He doesn't forgive them. This is the “flip side”, so to speak, of the doctrine of the office of the keys. Those sins that are not repented of are not forgiven by God in heaven, and are held by Him until they are indeed confessed. However, if we do confess them, then they are forgotten by Him through the merits of Christ on the cross of Calvary.

Therefore, there will be many in Hades because of their complete and utter rebellion against God. But, God doesn't want ANY of them to be there in the first place. If we are eternally condemned, it is our fault. If we are saved, it is all the work of Christ.

This doesn't mean, by the way, that Lazarus was blessed by God because he was poor! Just because we don't have earthly possessions doesn't mean that God is going to let us into heaven just to make up for our lack of blessing on earth. It IS possible to reject God and be poor at the same time. We can resent Him for blessing others and not us, and refuse to believe in Him until death. The result will be the same, but the cause is different. Our text clearly states that it is easier for those who don't have worldly riches to trust in God, because often, He is the only source that we have for support in this situation. However, wealth doesn't determine faith – only the working of the Holy Spirit, and the degree to which we reject Him, determines our faith.

What about this chasm that Abraham describes in our text between himself and the rich man? God cannot abide with sin – He is the definition of sinlessness. Heaven is a place unlike any that we have ever known. It is like the Garden of Eden before Satan entered the picture, where there is no sin, and only perfect communion with God Himself. Hades, on the other hand, is the absence of God, and that is where sin is given full reign. We cannot comprehend this, either. On earth, God is still active, and working in our lives to cause good works to happen. Only some have completely rejected Him, and ruled Him out of their lives. However, in hell, He is not active at all, and sin has full reign. Therefore, even though this world seems rotten, the place of eternal suffering is worse. It is complete and utter separation from God eternally. That is the chasm that Abraham

speaks of – this complete dichotomy and difference between the world that we live in and the world to come.

But, didn't Jesus descend into hell before His resurrection? Didn't He overcome this chasm? Yes, of course He did – but He was the only One who could go there and then return to heaven. The devil didn't have a hold on Him because He is truly God, and the most powerful force in all of creation. He is the sinless one, who is able to go to even the fires of Hades and not be burned or influenced. He went there to proclaim His victory to those who were in torment, and then to resume His seat of honor thereafter in the heavens, which He alone is worthy of doing. No one else is able to do this, because the devil is the second-strongest force in all of creation. If someone winds up in the lake of fire, it is because he has completely rejected God until his death. It is a place of no hope whatsoever, a place of no return, a place of eternal suffering and death apart from the love of God. The devil holds us there, because God is not active there.

So, what about the rich man's final request? What if someone did rise from the dead, in order to "win converts" to Christianity? Abraham said that it wouldn't do any good, because those who are in eternally condemned won't listen to anyone. During their entire lives, they rejected God, and did so until their death. They are totally committed to rejecting God, and exalting themselves over Him. They have made their choice forever, against God. They wouldn't even give God the time of day! In addition, Someone has risen from the dead and appeared to us. Christ the Lord rose from the dead on the third day, and appeared to many before His resurrection into heaven. If that solitary act for the sole benefit of mankind wasn't enough, nothing will ever be! Christ died to take away the sins of the world. All that is necessary is for us to confess our sins to Him, and He

promises that He will remove them from us. Therefore, we know that someone rising from the dead won't even work for someone committing the sin against the Holy Spirit, because it has already happened!

Hell is a place of torment. Heaven is a place of happiness. The two are completely opposite of each other, and there is no comparison between the two. Lazarus was in heaven, surrounded by the love of God; the rich man was in Hades, the complete absence of God. The reason why each was in their respective place was because Lazarus trusted in God's power to save him, and His love for all sinners, regardless of how much they have sinned against Him. The rich man was with the devil because he had completely trusted in the power of his riches to survive in this world, and thought that he didn't need God at all. Rather, he trusted in his own works to save him, and ruled God out of the picture. Much like the recluse that we talked about at the beginning of this sermon, the rich man trusted his own strength and his own knowledge over and above the truth that we all need others to survive in this world, and we all definitely need God to survive in the world to come. There will be rich people in heaven, but only those who do not reject God and His love on their way to becoming rich. There will be poor men in eternal condemnation, but only those who blame God until their death for putting them in such a predicament, and rule out His love for them irregardless of the earthly situation they find themselves in. We pray that God would work in our hearts faith in Him, as He has promised, rather than allowing us to become sour and think that our ways are best. We pray that He would change us – not like the recluse who didn't want to change for anyone. We pray that He would correct our sinful thoughts, words and deeds, and make them into good works that are pleasing to Him and helpful to our neighbors. God doesn't

want anyone to be in eternal torment, and has done it all for our salvation. He even met the superlative demand of the rich man, and rose from the dead so that we could be saved. His love conquers all, and endures forever. What a gracious God we serve! He comes to us when we could not come to Him, and is patient and loving toward us sinners all of our lives. He promises us the joys of heaven, just like He gave to Lazarus, who only received them out of God's love, and not his own merits. Amen.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Amen.