

SERMON

+ Lectionary 26 C (Pentecost 16)

September 28, 2025

There are two things this is NOT about.
One thing this IS about.
And a surprise.

First, this is NOT about money, wealth, or being rich.
Luke gives us a detailed description
of the man's wealth and lifestyle
so that we can see the stark contrast
between his lifestyle and that of Lazarus.
But his wealth, being rich, having money
is not really the rich man's problem.

Paul's letter to Timothy, our second reading,
may help us understand better.
"Those who *want* to be rich fall into temptation," he writes.
"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," he writes.
(1 Timothy 6: 9, 10)

Having money, being rich isn't the problem.
Wanting it, loving it, striving for it is the potential problem.
But Jesus doesn't describe this rich man
as greedy for more riches.
He just has it and lives that lifestyle.
So, the problem isn't really money, wealth, and being rich.

Second, this is also NOT about heaven, hell, and the afterlife.
This isn't a description of heaven or hell
and how we get there by living a certain lifestyle, or not.

Which is a good thing, if you think about it.
Because I dare say none of us can identify with Lazarus
in his extreme suffering and need,
but instead, we all surely have enough,
even if we don't wear purple robes and fine linen.

So if, as the story may seem to suggest,
the poor and destitute automatically go to heaven,
and anybody who has enough
is condemned to hell simply for having it,
it doesn't look good for us.

No, this isn't heaven and hell.
Lazarus is taken into the care of Abraham.
What does that mean?

Abraham is the patriarch of the promise
for the chosen people of Israel.
For the Pharisees –
and note that Jesus is telling this story to the Pharisees –
Abraham stands as the model of righteousness
and the agent of the promise.
So, Lazarus, the poor, destitute beggar,
is found to be the blessed and righteous one
who receives the fulfillment of the promise.

Meanwhile, the rich man is carried away to Hades.
What is Hades? No, not hell,
at least in the way we think of hell as the place of eternal punishment.
That idea only came hundreds of years later.
The more appropriate question may be, who is Hades?

Hades is the mythological Greek god of the underworld –
the realm where no one can be seen.
The Hebrew version is Sheol,
the depths where one is separated from God.

To these Pharisees who hear this story,
the rich man being taken into the care
of the mythological Greek god of the underworld
where no one can be seen
is about as far from righteousness and the Hebrew promise
as one can get.

In other words, the nameless rich man,
 who enjoys all the benefits and blessings this world values
 is in truth NOT blessed but is far from righteous.

Whereas, in stark contrast,
 the one who benefits from none
 of what the world strives for
 rests in the bosom of righteousness.

It's all very symbolic.
 It is a picture in story form
 of the great reversal of almighty God –
 the stark contrast between the ways of the world
 and the ways of the Kingdom of God –
 the reversal that we heard about in Mary's song of praise,
 when the birth of Jesus was announced to her
 in the beginning of Luke's gospel.

"My soul magnifies the Lord," she began.
 And she went on to describe how God acts:
 "He has shown strength with his arm;
 he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
 and lifted up the lowly;
 he has filled the hungry with good things,
 and sent the rich away empty. (Luke 1:46, 51-53)
 It's the great reversal of the ways of the world,
 and that is what this story describes.

So, if this isn't about the rich man's wealth,
 and he isn't sent to hell for it,
 what IS this about?

One thing this is about
 is one character who treats another character
 as if he weren't even a fellow human being.

That is the problem of the rich man.
 Because in the ways of God and his kingdom,
 Lazarus is as much a beloved child as is the nameless rich man.
 The tax collectors and sinners Jesus dines with
 are as much beloved children of God
 as are the Pharisees who challenge him about it.

The rich man sees Lazarus – make no mistake about it.
 He was laying right at his gate.
 He doesn't go anywhere without passing him.
 He even knows his name.
 He simply doesn't regard Lazarus
 as anything but a beggar or a servant – a nobody.

And even with his abundance
 of the very things Lazarus needs,
 the rich man ignores him
 as if he weren't even human.

And the tragedy of him is that it doesn't change
 even after the great reversal, either,
 when the rich man is with Hades
 and Lazarus is in the bosom of Abraham.

Even then, the nameless rich man
 still assumes that Lazarus should serve him
 by cooling his tongue
 and warning his brothers.
 He simply regards Lazarus as some kind of "other."

And that is one thing this IS about:
 seeing the other –
 even lying at our own gates –
 seeing them as a real person,
 a child of God,
 a child of the promise,
 who may need precisely what we have plenty of.

It's about showing sympathy,
which is feeling sorry for someone else's misfortune;
or more, empathy,
which is putting ourselves in their place
in order to see from their perspective;
or even more, having compassion –
which is literally to suffer with them.

The rich man showed none of that toward Lazarus,
though he did show the slightest glimmer of hope
when he thought of someone other than himself
when he thought of his five brothers.

But Abraham replied,
“They have Moses and the prophets;
they should listen to them.”

“No, father Abraham,” he argued,
“but if someone goes to them from the dead,
they will repent.”

He was trying to make his case
for Abraham to send Lazarus on his mercy errand.

But Abraham 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.” (Luke 16:29-31)
And that's where the surprise comes in.

God's love for us is so great,
God's mercy is so profound,
God's grace is so vast
that as futile as it appeared to Abraham,
God did it anyway –
raised someone from the dead
to cross that great chasm from death to life
to bring his own resurrected and eternal life to the world.

It was God's own son, of course,
born of Mary,
who preached and taught,
healed and forgave,
who told this story to confront the Pharisees
while he was on the road to Jerusalem
to die on a cross.

But God raised him from the dead
so that his preaching and teaching,
his healing and forgiveness,
his kingdom way and resurrected life
could be ours, too.

God did it anyway.
And welcomes us to his table with far more than scraps,
but rather, feeds us with the abundance of the earth,
the abundance of his love,
the abundance of his grace.
And fills us with the life that really is life.
And calls us to share that abundance and life
with all his beloved children.

In his great mercy, God did it anyway,
and sees us all as beloved children.
Thanks be to God!