

Sermon for September 25 2016

Luke 16:19-31 – The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus

Pastor Alan Bray

Grace and peace to each of you in the name of Jesus, our crucified and living Lord. Let us pray:

Gracious God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you this morning. Amen

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus is not difficult to understand, but it is exceedingly difficult to hear.

“There once was a rich man, dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day.” So begins this parable which Jesus shared with a group of Pharisees, for they were lovers of money whose behavior made it clear that they were foolishly trying to serve two masters: God and wealth.

“Oh, you Pharisees! You spend all your time justifying yourselves in the sight of others, but God knows what’s in your hearts!”

“Let me tell you a story.”

“There once was a rich man, expensively dressed in the latest fashions, wasting his days in conspicuous consumption. A poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, had been dumped on his doorstep. All he lived for was to get a meal from scraps off the rich man’s table. His best friends were the dogs who came and licked his sores.” (from “The Message” by Eugene Peterson)

Well, long story short, both men died. Lazarus was taken up by angels to the lap of Abraham, while the rich man was buried and found himself in torment in the depths of hell.

“Oh, Father Abraham,” cried the rich man looking up, “send Lazarus down to cool me off and ease my agony.”

“Oh, Child,” said Abraham, “you are reaping what you sowed. You’ve traded a life of ease for an eternal time of torment. And Lazarus, once ignored and mistreated, now is consoled. There’s nothing to be done about it. The chasm between you two is far too wide.”

“Well, at least command Lazarus to warn my five brothers about this place of torment. Have him urge them to change their evil ways!”

“Sorry, not going to happen! Your brothers should have already listened to Moses and the Prophets about such things.”

“But just imagine if someone came back to them from the dead! They’d change their tune.”

“Sorry again. If they won’t listen to Moses and the Prophets, they’re not going to be convinced even by someone rising from the dead.”

As I said initially, this parable is not difficult to understand, but it is exceedingly difficult to hear.

Professor Barbara Rossing of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago notes that this parable is not primarily an explanation of the afterlife, but it is an apocalyptic wake-up call to everyone who hears it.

She says:

“We are those five siblings of the rich man. We who are still alive have been warned about our urgent situation, the parable makes clear. We have Moses and the Prophets; we have the scriptures; we have the manna lessons of God’s economy, about God’s care for the poor and hungry. We even have someone who has risen from the dead. The question is: Will we...the five sisters and brothers...have (ears to hear)? Will we heed the warning, before it is too late?” (Barbara Rossing, “Working Preacher,” September 19, 2016)

Yesterday, while sorting through old papers and photographs, my wife Gretchen came across a single copy of the August 2005 First Lutheran Church Heartbeat which contained an article by Marie Benson urging readers to consider how we might help Sudanese refugees in our community. The article was followed by an anonymous piece called “When Ears Won’t Hear.” Knowing the gospel text for this morning, and being the bright girl that she is, Gretchen thought this piece might be appropriate for us. Just listen.

“When Ears Won’t Hear”

I went downtown shopping for designer sheets when someone whispered, “I have no bed.”

I stood at an appliance store comparing prices of microwave ovens when an Ethiopian woman wept, “I have no food.”

I hired a decorator to remodel my kitchen and to add more cupboards when a Cambodian child sobbed, “I have no cup.”

I dreamed of building a getaway place, a cabin in the woods, a country place. Across the water came the cry, “I have no country.”

I bought a new widescreen TV for a loved one’s pleasure when a war orphan murmured, “I have no loved ones.”

And then, the piece closed with a prayer: “May God forgive us when our ears won’t hear and our eyes won’t see the sounds and sights of suffering all around us. Amen”

Yes indeed...easy to understand, but exceedingly difficult to hear.