

Sermon Transcript First Sunday after Trinity, June 6, 2021

God's grace, mercy, and peace be multiplied to you in the name of our savior Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. I bring you greetings on behalf of your brothers and sisters in Christ in the Ethiopian Evangelical Church, Mekane Yesus, the ten-and-a-half million member church body in which we are serving in Africa. I also bring you greetings from the rest of my family. Gabrielle is here, but from Stephanie, Noah, Matthias, and Juliana who are currently in Nairobi. They bring you greetings as well.

Our gospel lesson today serves as our text for meditation. A number of questions arise from this text, not only, as pastor mentioned, the rather graphic visual on the front of your bulletin that speaks volumes about the reality of a rebellion against God and sin, but there are a number of questions that come forth from this text. For instance, who is your God? What do you worship? Is God's judgment at death final? Is that it, or maybe there's a second chance? How does God warn me of the judgment of hell, and what brings me to repentance and true faith? There are a number of questions that come forth from this text as Jesus gives this parable to the hearers. They're all important questions about the rich man and Lazarus.

So, as we meet this rich man. In this life, he's very rich. It's obvious. That's what the text says, "He's a rich man." We can see that by what he has and what he does. He wears fine linen dyed with very expensive purple dye. The process was very expensive and very costly and took a lot of time. So, to wear purple in that day was a sign of great, great wealth. He doesn't just have a feast now and then. The scripture says he feasts sumptuously. We might even say his meals are extravagant. And he does this every day. Lazarus, on the other hand, is poor in wealth. His health is not very good, and his dignity is minuscule. He lays there outside the gate of the rich man who could easily see him every day as he left the gate of his compound. This man is so pathetic the dogs lick the sores that are on him. He only desires just some crumbs from the table of this rich man.

Now, the sight of this poor man is not too far-fetched. In Ethiopia, if I were to walk up the street to the supermarket, which is about a quarter-mile away, either if I go up or if I go down by the roundabout, there are often three or four people with a little mat laying there, either missing appendages or missing digits or open sores. They've got a little mat there for you to put two or three birr on the ground. So, the idea of these things that we see in scripture are not too far away from us in the big city of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. But you certainly wouldn't see it here in Parrish, or it'd be a rare sight if you did.

So Lazarus dies, and he's carried off to Abraham's bosom, raised to eternal life in Heaven. The rich man dies and finds himself in the torments of hell. Lazarus is in Heaven because, by faith, he confesses his sin, and he trusts in the promised savior, Jesus. We conclude this because that's the only way that anyone is delivered to Heaven; is by faith in the promised Messiah, Jesus. However, if we look at the rich man, he's there in his torment, still suffering the sins which led him there. Now, we might address some of those questions that I posed for you at the beginning. For instance, the first one, how does the rich man think he is saved? In other words, where is his trust? Where is his hope? Who is his God?

Perhaps today, that's not even a thought of some folks who live their lives and don't even think about who God is. Or maybe they think that God of the Bible is some grumpy, old guy who's mean and doesn't like anybody. Or they've got another God, Vishnu or Shiva or some other. If they even think about God or go about their lives even caring. But from the text today, we see that it seems that the rich man believed that God must favor him because of his prosperity. Yet, even in hell, he's still preoccupied with his own comfort. Tormented

in the flames of hell, he asks Abraham to send Lazarus over with a drink of water rather than repent of his selfishness and self-righteousness. He still expects someone to come and serve him.

Now, second, the rich man appears to believe in salvation by label. First, salvation by comfort, second, salvation by label. He calls Abraham, "Father Abraham." So obviously, he shares the same bad thinking as the Pharisees who think they're saved by genetics rather than faith in God's promises. But he calls Abraham his father, "Father Abraham." Just as we heard in the Old Testament lesson, promises were given to Abraham, and the Jewish people were the children of Abraham. But he, like the Pharisees, would say, "We have Abraham as our father," believing God loved them because of bloodline. Faith was not a priority, genes or genetics were. For the rich man, whatever he believes doesn't matter, he believes Abraham will help him even in hell because he wears the label descendant of Abraham.

And then lastly, the rich man believes in salvation by signs or signs and wonders, not the Word of God. Although he still shows no repentance for his sin, the rich man asks Lazarus to be sent to testify to his five brothers, who are still alive so they may avoid the torments of hell. So go back in person he wants him to do. Abraham declares that such isn't necessary, because what do they have? They have the Word. They have Moses and the prophets. They don't need anything else. But this isn't good enough for the rich man. Not good enough. He doesn't believe that the Word will give faith. Rather, he believes that the miraculous return of this dead man, Lazarus, that will convince his brothers to believe. And to this Abraham says, "Even if they do not hear Moses and the prophets, they don't hear them, they won't be persuaded if someone rises from the dead." Now, Abraham is not talking about Lazarus, his resurrection, he's talking about Jesus' resurrection. So even when Jesus rises from the dead three days after the crucifixion, his enemies still refuse to believe. And because they've rejected the Word of God, they ultimately reject the word made flesh, Jesus Christ.

Now, we have to keep in mind, we don't know about these men. Scripture doesn't tell us a whole lot about their character. We tend to make some assumptions. We tend to impose onto God's Word our own ideas about rich and poor and so on. And because of this rich man ends up in hell, we're tempted to see this guy as an arrogant miser, as some person who hoards all his money, every dime. He's like Scrooge, counting every penny. He's this grumpy miser that hates everybody. This guy even makes Scrooge look like a good guy. But that again is something we bring to the text. We assume. We assume. We also have to keep in mind that Jesus is painting a picture... is speaking rather of the Pharisees who in scripture are called those who love money. He may be well painting a picture of someone similar to them. If we look at the context, the Pharisees actually were very beloved in first century. They weren't hated. They were looked up to. They were admired by the Jewish people. The Pharisees weren't hated, they were admired.

So, we often bring something to the text in our own minds. It could be, for example, the rich man is rather a warm and loving guy. He could be rather popular, who donates money to all sorts of charitable causes. It could be that even as he fares or eats sumptuously every day that people are clamoring to join him because this is a gregarious guy, and we love him, and we want to be with him. Not because they're wanting a handout, but because they want to be around this guy. We simply don't know what this man is like. And so, in the same way, we don't know about the character of Lazarus. Again, because he ends up in Heaven, we are tempted to picture him as the beggar with the golden heart, a well-meaning man who is unjustly reduced to rags. And again, that's something we bring to the text. It's not what the Bible says.

Lazarus may be a beggar who did terrible things in his life and only lately learned repentance. He may actually could have been someone who was hot tempered, a hothead who struggled with bitterness and anger every day of his life but understood he was a sinner and confessed it and repented of his sin. Because we don't know about the character of the rich man or Lazarus, we must be aware. Too often, this parable is misinterpreted to mean that rich snobs are condemned while nice poor people go to Heaven. We tend to impose on the text. There's a great book I read called "Misreading Scripture With Western Eyes". It's a great book, you should get it. It really opened my eyes up to how we often impose on the text what we think from the West on God's Word.

So, as I said, too often we misinterpret it because we assume something. But it could be that the nice rich man went to hell while the annoying beggar went to Heaven. It's not about being nice. It's about repenting and clinging to Christ alone and His forgiveness for you. And because Lazarus is forgiven, the Lord knows his name, and he lies in the bosom of Abraham that is in Heaven. And because the rich man is not forgiven, he's condemned eternally. And as a chilling reminder, we never find out his name because the Lord doesn't know his name. Now, God is omnipotent, He knows everything. But this man's name is not written in the book of life because he has rejected God.

So, we do well to pay attention and avoid the sins of the rich man, which prevented faith and repentance. We remember those three sins; salvation by comfort, salvation by label and salvation by signs. All three of these have a common theme. The goal of all three of these sins are designed to get you to reject God's Word. Because the rich man measured God's favor by his comfort, clothes, and food, he did not pay attention to the Word of God about his lack of true riches, faith and salvation. And because he was a descendant of Abraham, he saw no need to believe the Word that Abraham believed. We hear that in the Old Testament. God gave His word, a promise, and Abraham believed, and it was credited to him as righteousness. When Abraham told him the scriptures, the law and the prophets could save his brothers, the rich man wanted a miraculous sign instead. And all three sins resulted in his condemnation. All three sins seek your loss as well.

Now, the last thing the devil, the world, and your own sinful flesh wants to do is to hear and believe the promises of God's Word. Therefore, they have devised some clever false gods to make you think you are confessing the truth when you're not. Indeed, our heart is a great idol maker. We can create idols out of anything if we follow the sinful flesh. So, like the rich man, you might be tempted to the doctrine of salvation by comfort, to believe that comfort is the measure of faith. For instance, you might be tempted to believe that God loves you if you're comfortable, and God detests you if you're not.

We live in a context in Ethiopia and in Africa of the prosperity gospel, that God wants to bless you with a new car or a brand new car or a big house and a big bank account. That's how you know God blesses you and loves you. All right? But He doesn't love you when you're sick. That's the prosperity gospel. Sickness is all on you. It's your fault. Which is very condemning, isn't it? What do you do in a light of COVID? How can you control a virus from effecting you? There were a lot of people in Ethiopia, as here I would guess, that lived in constant fear rather than hope, which comes in Christ.

But sadly, sooner or later, you'll face the discomfoting terror of approaching death. COVID brought that right to us, right in our face, right in the congregation as well, in our own homes and communities. But what happens when death is close? Does that mean that God stopped loving you? We might be tempted to conclude that God must have no love left over when we are near death, but that only leaves us in despair

when we most need assurance of God's love and mercy for us. So then, like the rich man, we might be tempted to believe in, also, salvation by label, that your faith is fine because you are a descendant of Abraham. Well, we don't necessarily think in that context, we tend to think salvation by Lutheran. I'm a Lutheran, therefore, I am saved. Or I'm a Christian, therefore, I am saved. Whatever I believe must be Lutheran because I, a Lutheran, believe it.

Now, what does it mean to be a Lutheran? It denotes one who confesses the true doctrine of scripture and acknowledges that the Lutheran confessions are true exposition of the scripture. Now, we might be tempted to say, "Whatever I believe must be right, because I'm a Lutheran." It's why we never, or should dare never say, "Because I've learned before what I believe and teach, I don't need to study the scriptures and attend Bible study anymore. I learned it in catechism, so I've graduated, and I'm done." Right? Nope. Just like a missionary, a missionary goes into a new culture is always a student of that culture. I will never be an expert on Ethiopia. I'll never be an expert of 83 different languages. I'll never be an expert on the culture in Ethiopia. I'm always a student. Always a student. And so are you and me of God's Word. In Amharic, Jesus is called teacher. The word for teacher in Amharic is what they apply to Jesus, and the disciples are students. If you're a disciple of Jesus, you are a student. You're always a student, we never stop. We're students of God's Word.

So lastly, like the rich man, you'll be tempted to salvation by signs, the desire to look for God's presence and help in what you see. "Seeing is believing," we say, right? Not the Word of God. Read the Gospel of John, you'll see how many believed after all the signs Jesus does and how many walk away. The comfort level that we spoke of before fits in here. We tend to be comfortable. But there are other temptations besides comfort. There's also the seeking of salvation by signs. And so, people are tempted to judge their faith and the correctness of their church by financial gain or numerical growth or health status and any other kind of tangible measures or even personal health. But once again, such signs are not proof of the Lord's blessing and approval. It's a very challenging thing. My students often bring it up because of the prosperity gospel and the heavy law that comes down on people because, again, if you're sick it's your fault in this false teaching. And so, the theology of the cross, a theology of suffering is hard to comprehend for many in Africa as they hear this false gospel that God wants to make you perfectly healthy now and perfectly wealthy now and perfectly happy now.

We live life under the cross. Perfect healing comes in Heaven and in the new creation where sin and death and disease are no more. But we got to keep in mind there are, excuse me, plenty of people who are blessed abundantly by God with material things and still do not know Christ and still do not believe that he's risen from the dead. So, time and time again, this text warns us of the sins that would distract us from God and His promises and His word. It warns us not to trust in our comfort level, label or what we see. It bids us to hear the Word of God and to believe it, to cling to it, to hold onto it. Like the law that we have heard thus far, it does this for your good, because all of these temptations will fail you; comfort, signs, and so on, labels. The Word of God points you to your Savior who will not fail you.

So, are you afflicted? Are you worried? Are you troubled? Are you sick? Are you uncomfortable? God's Word tells you this: "There's no way that God does not love you or is out to get you." He's not waiting up there ready to zap you and give you a bad day, okay? Why? Why would we say that? Why is he not out to do these things? Because of Christ. God is never out of love and mercy for you. We might run short on mercy and love for others, but God never runs out. Your Savior was afflicted. He was beaten. He was troubled. He bore your sins.

He bore your sickness and infirmities. He bore the curse of your sin. He took it all to the cross. He died for them and rose again from the grave.

But there at the cross, He took all of that judgment, all that wrath of God upon himself, that God poured on Him. It was all given to Jesus on the cross, and there is none left over. God has no wrath for you, but only ready to forgive, ready to pour out His mercy and grace on you. Your sin is not bigger than His forgiveness. So don't learn about God from your sinful thoughts or your temptations, learn about Him from His Word. Cling to His promises. And all the more when you are afflicted, you must do so because He promises, as it says in the end of Matthew, "I am with you always, even to the very end of the age." He is what? Emmanuel. He is God with us.

And so, we cling to the Word, and we hear what Jesus calls to us. He calls you His beloved child. He calls you His own, that He has shed His blood for you and risen again for you. He calls you an heir of Heaven. Not an E-O-R-R, but H-E-I-R. You are a child of God. He has placed His name on you. At the beginning of service, we remembered our baptism where He placed His name on us. "You are my child in baptism." You're not a Christian because you say you are like the rich man. You are far better. You're a Christian because Christ says you are His.

So, does the world seem to crash down on you or crash around you? We can look at the news, that'll really encourage us, won't it? Yeah. Yeah.

That'll see the world crashing down. Do you long for a sign of the Lord's presence and His love? You don't have to look very far. Very shortly, we're going to come to this altar and receive the body and blood of Christ for the forgiveness of our sins. It's the most intimate moment that we have to be with God this side of Heaven, where He comes to us in His body and blood to forgive our sins. This may not be spectacular; a little thimble of wine and a little wafer that's kind of crunchy, but it's the body and blood in and with and under these things. It may not be spectacular. It may not be spectacular to pour water on a baby that's screaming because it doesn't want to get wet. It may not be spectacular to hear the Word preached, especially if the preacher goes too long. But in Ethiopia, they preach for an hour, so you got a discount. I'm giving you only half, okay?

But it's miraculous because God works through these means. He promises that He is present in, with, and under these things through His means of grace for your salvation. It's a very precious parable because it seeks to deliver us from all the things that would not save us. It bids you not to trust in riches or in poverty, comfort, or signs or wonders, labels or memberships or anything else for proof of God's grace and love for you. Instead, it calls you back to that life-giving treasure, the Word of God. There and in and through His Word, the Lord gives you forgiveness and faith and eternal life. And there, He declares to you the comforting good news that your salvation is certain because of Jesus' sake. And only for Jesus' sake, you have life and salvation in His name. Amen.