

Luke 16:19-31 (Trinity I)
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
June 19, 2022

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

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

“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” (Luke 6:20, 24). So begins Jesus’s first public teaching in Luke’s Gospel, the so-called Sermon on the Plain. In Christianity the poor are exalted and the rich are humbled. Mary sings in her Magnificat that God “has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent empty away” (Luke 1:53). Or as Jesus famously said: “Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God” (Matt 19:24). Historically Christianity has caught on most among the lowest levels of society, from slaves in the Roman Empire to European peasants, to the lower castes of India. The poor are drawn to Christ’s powerful message for the poor and lowly. Those with few earthly goods may be better able to understand spiritual poverty, while those who are rich in this life can have difficulty grasping that all good things are gifts from God. This morning’s Gospel text is a reminder that whether the Lord gives or takes away, we trust in the LORD and bless His name. Whether we are rich or poor, whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s.

When we hear what Jesus says about the rich and the poor, we can get the false impression that everything depends on either having material goods or lacking material goods. For most people, worth is measured by success. Wealth is seen as the reward of diligence and hard work. The more someone does, the more he receives in return. The prevailing attitude is that God helps those who help themselves. In a worldly sense this might very well be true. Effort

often pays off in the end. The problem is when we view material goods as rewards of our own efforts rather than as gifts from our creator.

Sometimes the opposite false impression is given that being poor is a good work in and of itself. In the early and medieval church, monks and nuns would take a vow of poverty. Worldly possessions were exchanged for communal living and a simple life based on the teachings of Jesus. The problem was that they believed their poverty made them righteous before God. Even then, the life of poverty was only for the extremely religious, not the average person. Everyone else pretty much lived the way people do today, striving after the riches of this world.

Today it is also commonly thought that being poor or marginalized automatically makes a person better. Material goods are considered stolen commodities. The wealth we have inherited or acquired is simply the result of someone else's labor. Poor, oppressed people throughout history and around the world did the heavy-lifting to give us the things we obtain so easily. Regardless of work ethic or moral character, being a member of an oppressed class is now grounds for boasting. Being poor becomes a good work in and of itself, a good work to be rewarded by redistribution of wealth or whatever else.

Our worldly reason sees the labels of rich and poor as things in and of themselves. To be rich is either good or bad. To be poor is either good or bad. But in Scripture we see that it's not so much being outwardly rich or poor that matters. It's faith in God that matters, a faith that can't help but manifest itself in love for the neighbor. We see this laid out clearly in our Epistle Lesson from 1 John chapter 4: "whoever loves God must also love his brother." As a negative example we have this morning's Gospel text about the rich man and Lazarus. At first it might seem like the rich man is condemned because of his wealth and Lazarus is praised because of his poverty. Abraham says 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.” But ultimately, it is the faith of Lazarus in the midst of his poverty that makes the difference. It is the unbelief of the wealthy man in the midst of his riches that makes the difference. Lazarus, though poor, trusted in God. The rich man, though wealthy, trusted in himself rather than God. His unbelief is revealed in how he treated poor Lazarus.

The rich man is traditionally named “Dives” from the Latin word for “wealthy.” Literally, his name means “favored by the gods.” It’s the same root where we get words like “divine” from. In the Roman world, people considered wealth a sign of the gods’ favor, just like people today. The natural inclination is to think wealth and a life of ease are divine rewards. The rich man was clothed in purple, the color of kings. He dressed in the latest fashion and wore the finest linen money could buy. He feasted sumptuously everyday, which shows how this rich man viewed life. Everyday was a day for a party. Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die. And then of course, like all people, the rich man did die. His life was consumed with chasing after his own desires rather than the things of God. In foolishness he laid up treasures for himself and was not rich towards God. Dives forgot that life does not consist in the abundance of possessions (Luke 12:15).

On the other hand, the name “Lazarus” comes from the Hebrew and means “God has helped.” The poor man, Lazarus, lay at the rich man’s gate. He was covered with sores and wanted nothing more than to be fed like a dog from the crumbs that fell from the rich man’s table. Yet he was not even deemed worthy of those meager rations. His only companions were the dogs, who came and licked his sores. Lazarus’s only help came from the God who “raises up the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with princes and

inherit a seat of honor” (1 Sam 2:8). It was the LORD who sent angels to carry Lazarus to Abraham’s bosom, placing him at a seat of honor in the life to come.

The rich man wanted paradise in this life but ended up in torment. Lazarus was tormented in this life but ended up in paradise. What was the difference? Is it because Lazarus was poor that he went to Heaven? Was it because Dives was rich that he went to Hell? Neither option is correct. The rich man was condemned not because of his wealth but because he did not have faith. We know the rich man did not have faith because where unbelief reigns, man is absorbed by the vanities of this world. The rich man did not trust in God, and that is reflected in his actions. He spent all his time chasing after riches, feasting sumptuously (not every once in a while, but every day), and in all that he never noticed the poor beggar God had brought into his life. Lack of faith in God is reflected in lack of love for the neighbor. Whoever knows the goodness of God has sympathy for the poor and lowly of this world, and “whoever does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.” Faith in God manifests itself in love for others. Faith and love must go together.

In the same way, Lazarus was saved not because he was poor, but because he had faith. Lazarus trusted in God even though everything seemed to go wrong for him in life. Although Christianity often takes root among the poor and downtrodden, sometimes even the poor are led not to place their trust in God but to grumble against the LORD and against the circumstances of their life. Ungrateful beggars grumble and curse when not given what they want, but Lazarus was patient. Lazarus did not grumble against God or against the rich man. He did not complain about his station in life but in faith accepted the burdens God placed upon him. Poverty and suffering in themselves do not make us acceptable before God, but being made acceptable to God transforms poverty, suffering, and death into something precious in God’s sight (Ps 116:15).

Lazarus had such faith in God. He could willingly endure the sufferings of this life knowing that his life and salvation were in the Lord's hands. With this true faith in God, Lazarus could love God and others even if he did not have the means of helping others. For Lazarus, bearing the cross placed upon him with patience was a manifestation of his faith.

On the one hand, Jesus says "Blessed are you who are poor" (Luke 6:20). On the other hand, Jesus says: "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (Matt 5:2). The poor in spirit are those who know that they have nothing in and of themselves to offer God, but stand before Him as spiritual beggars. Like Lazarus, they bear all things in faith, knowing that whatever God wills is for our good. There are many examples in Scripture of those who are not necessarily poor in this life, yet are rich towards God. For example, Job, David, and Abraham. Though they had many earthly possessions, they trusted in God alone for their life and salvation, even as Christians today. It's not wealth or poverty that saves; it is faith in the one who gives us all things.

The rich man did not love because he did not know the love of God. Lazarus loved others because Lazarus knew he was loved by God. We, too, love because God first loved us. In His love, God saw our miserable state and did something about it. In His love, God sent His only Son into the world to redeem the world. In love, Christ made Himself nothing, taking on the form of a servant and being born in the likeness of men. Jesus humbled Himself to the point of dying on the cross for our sins. He left His kingly hall and came to us beggars, covered in sores and dead in our trespasses and sins. In love Jesus was wounded for our transgressions. He took upon Himself our sins and iniquities and in turn gave us His royal robe of righteousness. And so God has highly exalted Him, and in Christ, we too, are exalted, ushered with Lazarus to Abraham's bosom as true children of Abraham and as true children of God. And so we in turn love because He first loved us. The power to love our neighbor in whatever situation only comes because we

know the love God has for us poor sinners. If God loved us while we were dead in our sins, how could we not love others as ourselves?

Even if you are not wealthy and able to eat sumptuously everyday like the rich man, his life is an example to us of a life lived in unbelief. The rich man did not fear, love, and trust in God above all things, and so the rich man did not love his neighbor, either. The rich man only lived for himself and in the end he received his reward: anguish in hell. So will it go for all who live separated from God and pay no attention to those in need. And even if you are not poor and miserable in this life the way Lazarus was, his life is an example to us of a life lived in faith towards God, and where there is faith in God and trust in what He has done for us in Jesus Christ, then there is also love for those around us. Faith cannot help but show itself in love towards others, for whoever loves God must also love his brother. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Offertory.