

The First Sunday after Trinity, A²D 2010

Luke 16:19-31

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1 His neighbors knew his name. He was not merely the rich man. He was somebody. His palatial residence was known by his name. Those who passed by his gate would remark: some would covetously admire; some would covetously ridicule. When the townspeople talked about him, they called him by name. They knew his name; it was synonymous with affluence, comfort, opulence. The rich man had worked hard to make a name for himself, and those around him knew it. If they could drop his name in a conversation, it seemed to elevate their own status. They knew his name, but Jesus did not. The one whose name they either did not know or could not recall was the beggar outside the rich man's gate. No one passed by and talked about him by name. He was, quite simply, the beggar. He was known more by his estate in life than the title his parents had given him. His name was not, in their estimation, worth knowing. No one knew the sick beggar's name. Except Jesus. His name is Lazarus. From the Hebrew name Eleazar, or "God has helped."

2 So in the parable, the man who spent a lifetime making a name for himself was nameless. And the beggar whose name no one could've remembered is remembered by name by the Lord Jesus. Lazarus died and was carried by angels to Abraham's side. There, in the company of Abraham and the saints, he who knew no earthly comfort has comfort and rest until the day of the Lord's return. The rich man—still nameless and anonymous—also died. He was buried, not carried. In Hades he who lacked no earthly comfort, was in torment. Jesus doesn't tell the parable as some story of karma, with the end result that everyone gets what's coming to him. Don't hear the parable to say that the rich are damned and the poor are saved. Don't forget who's there to welcome Lazarus: Abraham. His riches far surpassed those of the nameless rich man in the parable. And hell doesn't discriminate; it welcomes rich and poor alike. In hell, the rich man has torment, and—contrary to popular notions of hell as a cozy, crowded place—he has no company. Lazarus has comfort, while the rich man is in anguish.

3 Wealth is not the rich man's sin. Selfishness is his vice. The rich man's wealth is just the means by which he worships himself. You can be sure, however, that the rich man did not think in those terms. He had very pious explanations for his lifestyle. I'm just enjoying the fruit of my hard work. God has blessed me with my wealth; I might as well enjoy it. The filthy beggar should get a job and stop expecting to live on handouts. If I gave him money, he would only spend it on booze or cigarettes. There are plenty of government programs to help him out. I pay taxes and so help him out that way. If he doesn't know how to take advantage of those programs, well, that's his fault. And yet even the dogs are more righteous than the rich man. They make no excuses for not helping Lazarus. They serve him as best they can. Even dogs know what Lazarus needs. Dogs will do what the rich man is too selfish to do.

4 And yet, the commandments are clear. You shall not murder. What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not hurt or harm our neighbor in his body, but help and support him in every physical need. "What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead" (Jas 2:14-17). You shall not steal. What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not take our neighbor's money or possessions or get them in any dishonest way, but help him to improve and protect his possessions and income. "We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen" (1 John 4:19-20).

5 The poor are outside your gate as well. There are countless in your town and county who go hungry each day, who eat only because of the generosity of food pantries and government programs. There are those who struggle to find shelter when houses are foreclosed on and landlords evict for lack of rent money. Your pious-seeming excuses do not feed, clothe, or shelter your neighbor. Helping the poor is not what you're called to do with your leftovers, the money or resources you have once your own needs are met. God intends to use you as a means to provide daily bread for your neighbors.

6 Selfishness was the rich man's main problem. And yours. Impenitence is what damns him. He refused to hear Moses and the Prophets, sacred Scripture. And he was more concerned with making a name for himself than having his name known by his creator and redeemer. For all his wealth, he was deaf to the Word of God and blind to his neighbor's needs. The rich man knows what got him there: impenitence. So he pleads with Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers. "If someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent," he reasons. He's half right. Repentance is precisely what they need. But even if someone rose from the dead, it would have no effect if they're already resolved not to listen to the Word of God. "If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead." If you do not hear the Word of God, nothing will convince you to have faith. Faith comes by hearing. And faith lives in serving your neighbors in love.

7 Without repentance and faith, both of which are gifts God delivers and preserves, the rich man is entirely forgettable. But with the Lord's gift of repentant faith, Lazarus is entirely unforgettable. Jesus knows his name. The Rich Man Jesus Christ set aside all His divine wealth to assume the poverty of Lazarus and of the rich man. He went outside the gate of His heavenly dwelling to assume the poverty of the world's sin, to become the beggar. His poverty, His death on the cross bearing your sinfulness, is what makes you an heir to the wealth of heaven. Knowing the hearts of men, He was unwilling to justify sin or to call evil good. But he took the world's evil upon himself, endured death by crucifixion and separation from God, endured hell in your place.

8 He knows your name, Lazarus. He has called you by name. In the waters of Holy Baptism, the Triune God marked you with His name and etched your name into His eternal memory. He gave you the riches of faith in Jesus Christ through these otherwise humble waters. The forgiveness Jesus won on the cross was first delivered to you at the font. He knows your name, and He continues to declare it to you in the mouths of His ministers. They call you by name and declare to you, "I forgive you." He calls you by name and gathers you around His altar, around the table for His family meal. He dips His finger and soothes your parched lips and your sin-weary tongue. Here, you feast more sumptuously than the rich man. Here is the Body of Jesus, the heavenly Rich Man, in exchange for the poverty of your flesh. Here is the treasure of the very Blood of Jesus, each drop more precious than pounds of gold, given for you to drink for the forgiveness of your sins. Here, Jesus preserves the gift of repentant faith He has delivered, guards the name He has written in His book of life: your name. He knows you by name, and He will not forget.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria

Pastor Jeff Hemmer