

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace....

A woman once came up to me after a service and said, "I enjoy your sermons....you get so much out of the text that isn't there." She meant it as a compliment, I hope, that I explained things that weren't clear to her.

Today I want to get out of this text some things that are not there so we can see more clearly the things that are there:

1. This text does not condemn wealth. Some great servants of God, like Abraham, were wealthy. Jesus describes a rich man who wears fine linen and purple, both costly fabrics. He feasted every day, and could even afford to use bread for napkins and throw it away after wiping his face and hands. He is a solid citizen, with social standing. Wealth was not his sin.

2. There is no praise for poverty in this text. The picture of the beggar Lazarus is not a pretty one, as he lays by the rich man's porch. The dogs who licked his sores are not friendly lap dogs, they are wild dogs looking for food...like buzzards they circle around him, and he doesn't have the strength to drive them away. This is no pretty picture of poverty. It reminds me of the movie, "Fiddler on the Roof". Tevye is one of the poorest men in town, and as the movie opens, he is pulling his own milk cart because his horse lost a shoe. Tevye looks to heaven and says:

"You made many many poor people. I realize, of course, that it's no shame to be poor, but it's no great honor either. So what would have been so terrible if I had a small fortune?"

Tevye speaks the truth. There is no great honor in being poor. And like wealth, poverty can drive a wedge between us and God.

3. This is not a factual description of heaven and hell. Jesus believed in heaven and hell but made no attempt to describe them. The Hebrew expression "Abraham's bosom" was like saying 'pearly gates'. Hades was the expression for separation from God. These are symbols, not proofs of a fire and brimstone hell. Proofs are in scripture, but not here.

There are some indications of the nature of eternal life: there is self-consciousness (of where each man now is); there is memory of life here on earth; there is recognition (even across the gulf Jesus describes, each man can see how the other ended up).

4. There is no evidence here of the rich man's loving concern for his five brothers. He is trying to blame God for not sending someone from the dead to warn him earlier. Trying to blame God doesn't work...it is too late. It is not God's fault he is damned to eternal separation.

Nobody deliberately intends to go to hell. Almost nobody believes he is going to hell. Even those without faith fall back on the hope that there is no Hell. Maybe that's how the rich man felt. After this service, we could go downtown and ask people on the street or in the taverns if they believe that they are going to hell. I don't think we would find many who feel they are headed that way. Clearly, according to Jesus' story, some people are in for a rude awakening, like the man who happened to be rich.

Well, now that I've cleared away some of the underbrush, let's look at this story to see what is there, what Jesus does intend to teach us:

1. Jesus teaches that there is a life beyond this world; that God is in charge of both worlds, and that what we do in our life in one world affects our life in the other. What we do here is important, not because we are making 'brownie points' with God, but because each of us is becoming a certain kind of individual who belongs in a certain kind of environment.

For example, think of a person who finds worship important, who serves her neighbors unselfishly, gives of himself--bloodmobile, community service, tithes, and reads good books, including the Good book, regularly, and enjoys the fellowship of those who love God. Now that person is moved by her employer to a distant community. In this new community we will probably find this person in the same environment, because that is where she is at home...that's where he belongs. It's like that in this world of the five senses. Each of us is becoming the kind of person who is at home being with God and the environment of God, or is at home separated from God and the things that are important to God. We choose that environment, and God gives us the freedom to make that choice.

2. Jesus says that between these two environments there is a great chasm, and it cannot be bridged. Who digs that great divide? We do. The rich man dug a great canyon between himself and God, not because he was rich, not because he wanted to, but because he didn't care. He didn't care for those God depended upon him to care for. First, the chasm may have started with a selfish action, then it became a character trait so deep that not even heaven itself could bridge it.

The clearest evidence of what we believe about God is the way we treat other people. Godly acts of goodness and generosity and compassion are not just acts in themselves---they are the outward evidence that we really have grown into the likeness of the God we love. If we separate ourselves from those God loves, we also separate ourselves from God.

This rich man walked past Lazarus every day, but he didn't really see him, because he didn't really care. It was not what the rich man did that got him separated from God, it was what he did not do.

3. Finally, it comes down to this---we are the brothers of the rich man, because our eternal destiny is yet to be determined. What kind of persons are we becoming? Are we becoming people who care?--people who give a damn? Or are we damning ourselves by failing to hear God's call to love and serve with all we are and all we have? The rich man was not actively evil, or cruel---he was just heartless. He could not be moved by a neighbor's rags or ulcers or hunger---he could just walk by and say 'tough luck'. He was one of those unfortunates who just don't care what happens to others, as long as it doesn't happen to him. There are two kinds of people, Jesus says: people of compassion, and people who will find themselves separated from God. That's what it comes down to.

We are preparing for a stewardship celebration next Sunday---we will celebrate that each family in our parish has had the chance to sit down and ask: "What shall I give to the Lord in return for all God's benefits toward me?" Thanks to our Stewardship Committee and neighborhood helpers, we have been given a chance to take stock of what kind of people we are becoming, and where we belong in God's kingdom (Homecoming). Some of us are richer than others in terms of this world's goods--that's neither good nor bad. But all of us are blessed. And all of us have the needy at our porchbecause God has put them there for us to care about. We are all brothers of the rich man in Jesus' story.

This sounds like only fire and brimstone today....that unless we change our ways we will end up far from God. There is also a wonderful word of hope for us. Our hope is in the name Jesus gave to the poor beggar. He is Lazarus (in Hebrew, 'God is my help'). He is the only person in all of Jesus' stories to be given a proper name. I find hope in

the fact that although I am the rich man's brother who needs to be warned, in Christ I can also be Lazarus' brother, and say 'Lord, I don't like the person I'm becoming, be my help. You have promised to be the help of those who need you. Save me from my selfishness, my blindness toward you and those in need." This is our hope, that God will be gracious to us even as he calls us to be gracious toward others. What kind of persons are we becoming, and what is our destination? In our hearts Jesus gives us a clue to the answers for those questions, and a call to care.

+The peace of God....keep us close in the bosom of Abraham, and the arms of Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Prayer of the Church

God alone is our help. We lift up our needs, and the needs of the whole human family in prayer.

For those who lead the people of God, that they may seek after integrity and be true to their call to service, LORD, IN YOUR MERCY....

For Christians everywhere, that we may be rich in good works and generously share what we have, LORD, IN YOUR MERCY.....

That our eyes may be opened to see poverty and human need, and that seeing, we may respond with love, LORD, IN YOUR MERCY.....

For an end to the abyss between rich and poor, in our community, in this nation, and throughout the world, LORD IN YOUR MERCY.....

That our young people may learn to love charity, justice, and a gentle spirit, LORD, IN YOUR MERCY.....

For the aged, the infirm, the lonely, the homeless, and for all who need help to live with dignity; especially we remember our hospitalized members, Dorothy Kahl, Charles Gilbertson, and Peter Herbst, LORD, IN YOUR MERCY.....

For the homes of our congregation, and the love of husband and wife we give you thanks. We pray for Jeffrey Eick and Jennifer Demling as they prepare to marry. We thank you for 70 years of blessings upon the marriage of Herbert and Esther Hartwig. Make us responsive to the needs of all, including those in our homes. LORD, IN YOUR MERCY.....

Giver of all life, we ask you to sustain our life and the life of the world. Hear our cries for help. Make us as generous as you are in answering those who turn to you. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.