

St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
September 25, 2022 – The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Luke 16:19-31  
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

This morning's reading from Luke – like other readings from this Gospel that we have heard recently – calls us to look at life through a lens that turns the world upside down. Jesus tells his disciples and the religious leaders a parable of shocking reversal. The world's perspective and God's perspective are contrasted in the clearest terms.

“There was a rich man.” The man is not named, even though he is obviously an important person. He “was dressed in purple.” The dye used for purple cloth was extracted from shellfish and was very expensive. Roman law stipulated who had the right to wear purple. So, those hearing this parable would understand that this rich man had the approval of the Roman authorities and was respected and honored. Anyone who saw this man would know these facts immediately.

The rich man “feasted sumptuously every day,” not only on special occasions, but daily. He would have entertained other rich, important people at his feasts. He lived his life of privilege in what today would be a luxury gated community. He was able to keep poor and undesirable people out of his space, his life, even his awareness, on the other side of the gate.

At the rich man's “gate lay a poor man named Lazarus.” In all of Jesus' parables this is the only person who is given a name, and his name means “God helps.” That's certainly not obvious at first! Lazarus is poor and hungry. He is located outside the property of a man who is very rich but so unconcerned with the needs of people less fortunate than himself that he gives nothing for their relief. Lazarus “longed for” – but did not receive – “what fell from the rich man's table,” the scraps. He was “covered with sores.” Someone with such a skin condition was regarded by religious people of the time as ritually unclean, perhaps even cursed by God. No one took care of Lazarus. Only dogs, which were regarded at the time as unclean animals, licked his sores.

Jesus presents two men whose lives are at opposite poles. In the eyes of the world, one was at the top and the other at the bottom. One had a life of abundance, the other had almost nothing. And then each man died. And the reversal begins.

Lazarus “was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham.” These words convey an image of paradise, a blessed afterlife. The man who had been an outcast in the eyes of pious Jews was taken to be with Abraham, the great patriarch of the Jewish people.

The rich man died and found himself in Hades, the abode of the dead. He was tormented by thirst, in agony in flames. He sees Abraham and Lazarus “far away” and begs Abraham for mercy. “Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue.” Even in the flames the rich man retains his attitude of privilege and regards Lazarus as a servant who might attend to his needs!

Abraham explains that the “gate” now functions in the opposite direction. “Those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so.” Lazarus – who might want to reach out in compassion to relieve the rich man's suffering – cannot cross the chasm to help the rich man any more than the rich man can leave Hades and join Abraham. The reversal is irreversible.

Understanding that there is no help for himself, the rich man begs that Lazarus might visit his five living brothers to warn them to avoid “the place of torment.” Abraham refuses this request. Like the rich man, his brothers already have all the warning they need. In the Hebrew Bible, in the commandments given through Moses and in the writings of the prophets, the lessons have all been taught already. “No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.” Abraham replies, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.” I don’t know about you, but I find those words absolutely chilling.

People who heard this parable at the time Luke recorded it, approximately 50 years after the life of Jesus, would have instantly thought, as we do, of the one who had risen from the dead, Jesus Christ. With these followers of Jesus and all Christians since, we believe that the teaching of Jesus has more than human authority. Jesus’ life and ministry, his teaching, his death on the cross were all validated by God in the resurrection. When we hear this parable, we are hearing teaching with divine authority, teaching from the One who has risen from the dead. Are we convinced?

The rich man was at the top in the eyes of the world and Lazarus was at the bottom. Jesus teaches that this isn’t the way God views the two men. God has compassion for Lazarus because in his life he has received “evil things.” The rich man’s worldly attitude of privilege and entitlement, and especially his lack of compassion and failure to help the poor, is “an abomination in the sight of God.”

Do we believe Jesus? Do we believe that God is generous, loving, and compassionate? Do we believe that the world, God’s world, is the gift of God, the outpouring of God’s generous love? And if we believe that, do we regard everyone as the rightful recipients of God’s gifts? Do we see ourselves as instruments of God’s generosity to others? Do we act as instruments of God’s generosity to others?

Literally millions of Christians around the world have heard this parable today. What human suffering might be relieved in Christ’s name if every Christian who heard this parable and had the means to give alms, went home and wrote a check to an organization that helps the hungry or sick or people in prison? Or did a kind action for a neighbor? What witness to the world might the church make if the members of every congregation went home and thought and prayed about how their congregation could reach out to people in need and then worked together to do something?

Gathering together for worship is only the beginning of our obedience to God’s call “to walk in love as Christ loved us.” If we hear the Word but do nothing to live the Word, we are worse off than those who have not heard because we risk thinking that by listening alone, we have fulfilled our obligation to God. Many people in the church apparently think this way. But Jesus teaches us that God’s thoughts are not our thoughts, God’s ways are not our ways. Each and every one of us is called to be “doers of the Word and not hearers only.” As a parish we are called to work together, to do the will of Christ together. So, as we think about and plan for the future of St. Columba’s, I hope that we will find ways to make serving the community a priority. For Christ’s sake, for our sake, for the sake of the people God loves.

We are blessed to hear the good news from the One who has risen from the dead, our Lord Jesus. We have been blessed that we might be a blessing to others. Each of us and all of us. May the Holy Spirit guide us and grant us the grace and strength to make our faith a living reality today and tomorrow. In Jesus’ name. Amen.