

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
September 28, 2025 – The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Amos 6:1a, 4-7; Psalm 146; 1 Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31
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In this morning's reading from Luke Jesus tells his disciples and the religious leaders a parable of shocking reversal, the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. You may know this passage as the Parable of Lazarus and Dives. "Dives" is Latin for "rich man." The world's perspective and God's perspective are contrasted in this parable 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. Those hearing this parable would understand that this rich man had the approval of the Roman authorities and was respected and honored. 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 might 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 – the scraps from the rich man's table. He was "covered with sores." Someone with such a skin condition was viewed by religious people of the time as ritually unclean, perhaps even cursed by God. No one took care of Lazarus. Only dogs, regarded then 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. 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. Seeing Abraham and Lazarus "far away," he begs 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! But the "gate" now functions in the opposite direction, and even if Lazarus had desired to reach out in compassion to relieve the rich man's suffering, he could not. 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 his fate. But his request is denied because, like the rich man, his brothers already have all the warning they need in the Hebrew Bible. "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. When we hear this parable, we are hearing teaching with divine authority, teaching from the One who has risen from the dead.

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." As I quoted from Psalm 14 (verse 1) last week, "Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds."

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?

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 do 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."

Many of us feel discouraged and helpless when we become aware of the thinking and behavior of people like the rich man in this parable, people living now who have no regard for huge portions of the world's population – people who are poor or live in war-torn places, people who seek asylum from unspeakable conditions, people who have no access to medical care, people who suffer from ecological degradation and disaster, and on and on.

It may be helpful to notice how other people centuries before us have shared our feelings and sought consolation in the promises of God. In today's passage from the prophet Amos, written in the 8th century BCE, we hear a condemnation of the idle rich of his day. In justice, God will send them first into exile from the land of Israel. In Psalm 146 we are guided to "put not our trust in rulers, nor in any child of the earth, for there is no help in them." Our help will come from the Lord. The promise is that God will come to reign forever and will act to make things right: give justice to the oppressed, food to the hungry, set prisoners free, heal the blind, lift up those who are bowed down, care for the stranger and the widow and orphan. Part of the promise is that God will finally frustrate the way of the wicked. In the First Letter to Timothy we are encouraged to "fight the good fight of faith," to trust in the promises of God. And supported by our faith, we are to do good, according to the teaching that has been given to us.

We are all 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. This can be very challenging in the world we live in. We need one another's support and encouragement. We need guidance, grace, and strength from the Holy Spirit. Let us pray for what we need to make our faith a living reality today and tomorrow. For the love of God and in Jesus' name. Amen.