

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ!

We have an unnamed man of great wealth, and we have a desperately poor beggar, whose name is Lazarus. I guess you could say that the two of them are neighbors, leastways, they're neighbors of a sort. Lazarus lay at the rich man's gate. The rich man had to go right past Lazarus every time he went in or out of his home.

Talk about contrast! In spite of their physical proximity to one another, the two of them seem to dwell in parallel universes, worlds widely separated, luxury and poverty. I wonder if the wealthy man even knew Lazarus. I wonder if the wealthy man even connected Lazarus as a fellow human being. Probably not, because to satisfy the demands of his family, and continue to maintain and even grow his wealth, he probably spends his time pursuing his personal goals, he can't fret about Lazarus. The wealthy man physically excludes Lazarus with a fence around his house, and then emotionally excludes Lazarus with a fence around his heart.

I suppose the rich man if he thinks of Lazarus at all, thinks Lazarus was lazy, that he got what he deserved, "people like that" differing from "people like us."

Now most people, back then, probably thought, as did the rich man, because anyone as poor, sick and miserable as Lazarus had to have done something to warrant God's punishment. Remember Jesus' disciples asking him concerning the blind man? They asked Jesus, "who sinned, this man or his parents?" So folks might not have known what Lazarus did wrong, but it must have been terrible.

And Jesus continues his parable by telling us that both men died. Interesting how that works, no matter how good the medical care, how healthy the diet, no matter how rich or poor, or even how much you exercise, death continues to come, once to a customer. And then Jesus adds an unexpected little twist, after death, the rich man is punished and Lazarus is blessed. It must have been quite a shock to Jesus' audience. Consider this, not everyone in Jesus' day believed in an afterlife, for example, the Sadducees, who were the rivals of the Pharisees didn't believe in life after death, or for that matter, in angels either. But those people who did believe in an afterlife, assumed that the blessings and punishments of this life, would just naturally be extended into the next. So they would have been expecting Jesus to say that Lazarus' suffering would have continued after death, while the wealthy man's blessings would have also continued after death.

We can just imagine the gasp and disbelieving look from each member of Jesus' audience when he says that Lazarus has gone to be with Father Abraham, and the rich man goes to the place of punishment. Talk about reversing expectations, the blessed shall suffer and the suffering shall be blessed. What kind of logic is that? Might as well say that the rich shall be poor and the poor shall be rich, might as well say that the last shall be first and the first shall be last. Is Jesus saying that Lazarus is blessed in the next life because he suffered in this life and the rich man deserves punishment for being callused to Lazarus' plight?

Brothers and sister, remember now that Jesus is telling us a parable, a story, not a "travel guide to heaven and hell," so this is not a literal description of the afterlife, of heaven, or hell. In Jesus' time it was believed by many that hell was divided into regions according to the moral state of the dead, and so, Jesus' parable would have been immediately understood by those who were listening to him. So the rich man is

tormented in the life to come, miserable with thirst, and he looks up and see's Lazarus. Note now that Lazarus is with Abraham, the patriarch of the Israelites. Those listening to Jesus would have assumed that Abraham would naturally welcome a rich man, because after all, if the man was rich, it must have been his reward for goodness. And the rich man cries out for relief, asking Abraham dispatch Lazarus, to bring him a soothing drop of water. His request is denied, and I wonder if he finally realizes that perhaps he should have been more compassionate. Too late though for his family if they continue on that road. "Send Lazarus to tell my family what's going to happen!" Again the request is denied. Why? Because if the rich man's family won't be guided by the words of Moses and the prophets, they won't be convinced by anyone raised from the dead. Wow! Does that sound familiar. The rich man lived behind a wall that even extended around his heart to keep out the needs of others. The teaching of the law and the prophets requires the faithful to love God and to love one's neighbor. You know, love requires more than just not harming someone else. Love reaches out, love is active, not passive. It demands more than indifference. Love requires that you help. There's a chasm between the rich man and Lazarus, in this world, and in the next. Now we are not saved by our good works, nor are we condemned by our lack of good works, our faith, our salvation, is not something we can earn, it's a gift from our gracious God, given to us without merit, entirely through God's grace. But we are still responsible for our decisions, and those decisions have consequences, even if we don't like to think about that. We live in an age, that if it thinks about God and about Jesus at all, thinks of God as all compassionate, forgiving all, willing to let us live any way we would like, as long as our intentions are good. Our rich man tried to live behind a wall of indifference, he didn't do any real harm to Lazarus, except by doing nothing, except by refusing to get involved, he didn't mean to do anything wrong.

Unfortunately, most of the world is suffering, warfare, disease, drought, terrorism, hurricanes, so many problems we can't begin to list them all. Parents and children watch each other die of disease or starvation. ZIKA continues to spread, as does Alzheimer's, as does disease after disease. Even when we think we've eliminated a disease, polio for instance, it makes a comeback. There are people here in Minnesota, who are hungry, who are ill, who have no place to turn. You know my friends, we here at Trinity do a lot of things right, we do a lot of things that must be pleasing to God. But we can do more, we must do more. To whom much is given, much is expected, and my friends, we have been given much, and we can leave nothing neglected. Martin Luther wrote that as Christians, we "...are Christ one to another and do to our neighbors as Christ does to us."

Brothers and sisters, the message from this parable this morning is that our actions have consequences, it's not necessary for us to actively do harm toward others, because there is a high price to pay for our indifference toward others. Our indifference causes great distress to God. We are accountable for our actions and our inactions, and both have consequences. Our indifference disappoints God as much as our worst moral failings. The apostle Paul said in his first letter to the Corinthians that "we are the body of Christ." That means that there may be others who can't see God with their eyes, but they can see us, and God's love shining through us. When we care for others, in concrete ways, we make it much easier for

them to believe in a God who cares about them. The message today is one of hope, it is the hope of our resurrected savior Jesus Christ, and his grace given to us, it is the hope that says let's not wait for a resurrected beggar named Lazarus to show up in our neighborhood, instead let's live, starting today, as God calls us to live.

AMEN