

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

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1 Timothy 6:6-19

Luke 16:19-31

THE LIFE THAT REALLY IS LIFE

In case you haven't heard, the first presidential debate will take place tomorrow night. There is a common story form into which this event could be placed that goes like this – just after Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton gave their opening statements at the debate, a bank of spotlights above fell right on them. So instead of the candidates answering questions from Lester Holt in an effort to get into 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, they found themselves fielding questions from Saint Peter standing before the Pearly Gates of heaven. We're not going to finish that particular story right now, but I think it would be safe to say that supporters of Donald Trump and supporters of Hillary Clinton would finish it differently from each other. The primary point of this kind of a story, or perhaps the general election point of such a story would not be to give us a sense of what heaven is like. Instead, it would be to give guidance about what would lead to the best choice that could shape the future in this realm, not the next. And, it would be a good story if it had a bit of surprise involved in it.

We hear Jesus tell a story with a similar purpose in our passage from Luke's Gospel today. The point of the story is not to tell his listeners what our eternal destination might be like. The focus is on heavenly and hellish values in this life, not on a description of the afterlife. The parable begins with two main characters, one who is ridiculously rich and one who is pitifully poor. Jesus knows most of his listeners would have thought of the man with a lot of money as being blessed by God and the poor homeless man as one who likely was being punished by God for something he had done wrong. But Jesus challenges the common thought in this story in several ways. Surprisingly, we are told the poor man's name, but not the rich man's name. What's more, the poor man's name is Lazarus, which means 'one whom God helps.' For those who thought God only valued those who were materially 'blessed,' this story might challenge them to think again. Also, when both men die, it is the poor man who gets carried by angels to heaven to keep company with the great Patriarch Abraham while the rich man gets buried. That's the end of Act One.

Without intermission, we move to the Second Act, a scene set in the afterworld. The rich man finds himself not in heaven, but in a place of judgment. Pharisees and some who were of Jewish heritage believed there was a life after death with good people and evil people going their separate ways. Some thought the deceased could look over a great chasm to see each other. The situations of the two men had been reversed in the life beyond. The rich man calls out to Father Abraham, asking that he send Lazarus as an errand boy to comfort him. Isn't it interesting that he knew his name to ask for his aid, for he had not ever extended aid or comfort to Lazarus during their earthly lives! He asks for mercy, but not for forgiveness. Yet, without the latter, there is little opening for the former. The rich man had wanted to keep distance between himself and Lazarus during life. He had kept the gate outside his house tightly locked, as such riff raff made him feel uncomfortable in his wealth. Yet let me say the judgment of God in this play is not against this man's wealth, for if that were the deciding factor, Abraham would have been where the rich man was and not with Lazarus. For the great patriarch also had been a man of considerable means. The judgment was not against the man's wallet, but against his heart, the gates to which were closed to God's message of transformation. For this wealthy individual, even though Lazarus was laying right at his front gate, never lifted an eyelid to look, never lifted a finger to help. The chasm that separated them was one which had been dug throughout the rich man's life.

When it comes to money, we tend to focus on what it can enable us to do, but this story reminds us of what it cannot do. It cannot buy good relations with God. At times, when we become overly enamored with it, it actually can hinder our relationships with others, including God. That's what the Apostle Paul warns young Timothy about in our other scripture reading. Instead of looking down to focus on the bottom line, he urges him to pursue what comes from above: righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness. Paul does not reprimand those who are rich, but they get challenged to be rich in good works as a way to experience life that really is life.

Going back to the parable, the formerly rich man, to his credit, seems to care about his kinfolk. He believes his siblings share his lack of spiritual vision and may well have developed chasms between themselves and those who were poor. He pleads that they be warned so they don't end up like him. But Abraham replies, saying they need to listen to what they already have: the Hebrew scriptures that were called the books of Moses and of those of the prophets. In them, they already had ample witness that God desires a compassionate response to the poor and a commitment to fairness and justice on their behalf. Yet this rich man who had worn elaborate clothes, had been fed wondrous meals, who had lived in a spectacular house asks for something even more elaborate, wondrous, and spectacular that might compel a change in his siblings' hardened hearts. Maybe they would take notice if they were to hear from somebody about what it is like on the other side from this life. Send them Lazarus as one who comes back from the dead and then they would change their priorities. Abraham sadly replies that they wouldn't be convinced even if someone were to rise from the dead to give them the message.

We may feel like this is a parable that doesn't meet us where we are. The story is one of extremes – the exceedingly rich and the terribly poor, expressions of heavenly reward and hellish judgment. What is there for us here? Perhaps where we might connect with this story is in understanding ourselves to be the five brothers of the rich man. He had wanted his siblings to have someone who had risen from the dead to go back and tell them about the better way to live. That's actually what we have in the One who tells us the story today.

So even though we didn't finish the story about Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump standing before Saint Peter, we will get to finish the more important story about how we will react when we hear this One who has come back from the dead tell us that there is a better way to live. It is a way of living that goes beyond being satisfied just with fancy clothes that will go out of style and exquisite food that will meet our appetite for only a few hours. He wants us to have a life that really is life. There may be what gets called 'the good life,' that requires a chasm of separation, but there is a better life than that. The rich man thought he had it all, but he was sorely lacking in compassion, in kinship, in having a depth of purpose, in being in touch with eternal values. If the story of our lives ends up being about little more than the love of money, it will be a sad story indeed. So we get to begin to write the conclusion of the story today. May it be said, without debate, that our lives will reflect God's goodness and love, for what after all could be richer than that!