

2020 Trinity 1
Luke 16:19-31

Many years ago a book called “Heaven is for Real” came out. It was hugely successful. More than 11 million copies of the book have been sold. It has even been made into a hollywood movie that grossed slightly over a 100 million dollars. In Christian terms that is hugely successful. Many people are intrigued by a picture of heaven. We’ll discuss the problem with that in the third part of this sermon. The book “Heaven is for Real” did great in our society, but the book that our society really needs is “Hell is for Real!” I don’t think that would sell as well! Do you?

Jesus talked about hell a lot! Since Jesus talked a lot about hell, it should probably consume more of our conversation as Christians, but it sure isn’t popular, is it? Today’s Gospel story about the rich man and Lazarus talks about hell. Jesus lovingly warns us about the danger of hell. The rich man and Lazarus are examples for us. Examples of what to emulate and what to be wary of.

Let me tell you about two pastors I know personally. They have been pastors for about the same amount of time: over twenty years. They have both been faithful to the Word of God and to the Confessions. I know from personal experience that they are both amazing preachers. Both have been invited to preach at the Fort Wayne Seminary. I also know from personal experience that they are both amazing teachers. One has been featured on Issues, Etc, a national radio program, many times and the other has not. The same one featured on Issues, Etc. has successfully published multiple books with Concordia Publishing House and the other has not. To my shame, I have considered one as more “successful” than the other, whatever that means. Even though I love both men dearly and would do anything for them, I’ve judged one man more successful than the other!

Do you see why I call it shameful?

Do you see the problem?

How is what I've done like the rich man?

I certainly don't feast sumptuously every day. I do enjoy the occasional rib eye steak, but Erin and I don't eat out all the time and hardly ever at fine restaurants. I certainly don't wear purple! Or even the latest fashions, for that matter. But where have I gone wrong? What have I done that is like the rich man?

[*pause*]

I've judged based on external appearances, haven't I?

I've equated worldly success with faith, haven't I?

Now certainly, both pastors are godly men who I try to emulate. They are deeply pious men who are a gift to the church. But I still judge them by a worldly standard.

I believe most of us fall for this trap. We admire people who "have it together" and are successful in life, however we define that. We judge people by their exterior appearance don't we?

Samuel in the Old Testament did the same thing. King Saul has rebelled against the Lord and Samuel is sent to anoint a new king. When Samuel lays eyes on David's eldest brother, Eliab, and thinks, surely this is the man I'm supposed to anoint. He's so impressive! But God tells Samuel that, "the Lord sees not as man sees. Man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." (1 Sam 16:7b)

The rich man in our Gospel is impressive isn't he? He can not only feast sumptuously but invite his friends to the feast as well. According to the world, he is blessed by God. It's like LeBron James today. God sure did bless him with extraordinary talent, hasn't he? And look what he's done with it!

There's always the debate about who's the greatest in basketball and LeBron is named in that discussion, and rightly so. The NBA hasn't seen anyone like him. With two different teams, LeBron appeared in 8 consecutive finals. That stat is incredible all by itself! And it's still incredible even though he didn't win them all. And it's well documented how well LeBron and his friends have done by worldly standards.

But that's not how God judges. If it is, we're all in trouble, aren't we. And I'm not saying anything about LeBron's status before God. I don't know him and have no idea if he believes in Jesus or not. We can't see faith, can we?

God can. He judges by the heart. David is a poor choice for king if you look at outward appearance. Even his dad and brothers can't believe Samuel's going to anoint him! But God doesn't look at the outward appearance. He looks at the heart. God sees faith. David is described as having a heart after God's own heart. He trusted in God above all things.

And David was rich! Riches certainly aren't the problem. If so, then Joseph, Abraham, and Job would all have problems. Joseph was the second richest person in the kingdom of Egypt. Abraham was the richest of all those around him. Job's riches as described in Job are astounding. But they all trusted in God.

You know the first commandment. You shall have no other gods. What does this mean? We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things. Joseph, Abraham, Job, and David trusted in God.

The rich man in our tale today did not. Jesus is telling this story to the pharisees who loved riches and justified themselves before men. The rich man is just like them. When Jesus tells us that "the rich man... feasted sumptuously every day," he is telling us that the rich man daily put his trust in mammon and not God.

Faith doesn't look to the external circumstances. Faith looks to the promises of God. Faith looks to Christ.

In a difficult circumstance, whether poverty or sickness, faith says, “I know that my God loves me. I know that my God has promised me that He will make good out of this, even if I only see it in eternity. My Lord Christ has suffered, so why shouldn’t I bear a little suffering.”

The fool looks to suffering as a merit before God. Our merit counts as nothing before God. As Luther says, “Poverty and suffering make no one acceptable before God; rather, whoever is first acceptable before God, his poverty and suffering are precious before God, as Psalm 116 says, ‘The death of His saints is cherished before the Lord.’”¹ Faith trusts that his suffering is precious because he is God’s dear child in Holy Baptism.

Why do God’s saints suffer? I don’t know. I wish I could give you an answer. That is God’s secret counsel which we are not permitted to look into. You remember Job’s friends, I’m sure. They were awesome friends when they sat with Job in silence and shared in his suffering. When they tried to give an answer, they sinned. Job must have sinned. There was something that was wrong with Job. That definitely wasn’t the answer. We know that Job had not sinned but that the devil was testing his faith. We also know that Job had questions about his suffering and did not sin.

It’s okay to cry out to God. The Christian doesn’t seek suffering, but when it happens, he cries out to God. The Psalms are filled with Psalms of lament crying out to God. Read Lamentations. God, I don’t understand? God, please ease my suffering! God, please help me!

Dear Christian, you are never alone. Christ suffered. He understands your suffering. He suffered so that you wouldn’t have to suffer the eternal fate of the rich man. He suffered to pay for your sin. He suffered so that you could become a child of God in Baptism. As a child, you have the right to curl up in God’s lap and show Him where it hurts. You have the right to ask for God to end your suffering.

¹ AE78, pg 59

The Christian puts faith in the promise of God that He will make it good regardless of whether He ends your temporal suffering or not.

The fool puts faith only in the positive answer to prayer. If God ended my poverty, He loves me. If God cures my cancer, He loves me. If God gives me what I want, He loves me.

The fool looks to the external workings of God. The Christian looks to the promises of God fulfilled in Christ.

Christian faith can look weak at times. Lazarus looked weak, didn't he? But God doesn't look at the external appearance of a man, but at his heart. Lazarus comes from the name Eliazor which means God is my help. Even though Lazarus suffered, he trusted in God. And God saved him. The weakness of the Christian is to the glory of Christ!

The Christian life is not only filled with faith but with works. Works have a way of showing someone's faith.

The fool works to get riches so that he may live sumptuously and does everything he can, regardless of the cost, to continue living in that luxury.

The Christian works to serve his neighbor in love. The Christian enjoys the good fruits of the earth, but never at his neighbor's expense.

You might ask how is Lazarus an example of this?

Even the Proverbs say, "the poor is disliked even by his neighbor, but the rich has many friends." (Pr 14:20) Lazarus in his state of suffering has nothing to offer his neighbor, does he? The rich man certainly despised him. This is the key to how Lazarus served his neighbor. Lazarus was a perfect opportunity for the rich man to love.

We see this in parents as they get older. They don't want to be a burden for their children. God puts them in our life to serve them. What an honor it is to be able to serve our parents. Far too often, pride gets in the way. We are dependent creatures. God made us that way. To deny our dependence is to deny our Maker.

God serves us through other people primarily. We are given earthly riches to serve those neighbors God puts in our life. A rich man can do more than a poor man, but all of us have the ability to help our neighbor and to be helped by our neighbor. That is why God instituted the family and the government. So let us do good to our neighbor as we have the opportunity. As our Lord tells us, "whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker but he who is generous to the needy honors Him." (Pr 14:31)

This brings us to the problem of "Heaven is for Real." It is actually not a problem with the book itself, but about people's fascination with it.

Jesus says, "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few." (Mt 7:13-14)

If we asked most people that are fascinated by "Heaven is for Real," I'm pretty sure we'd get the opposite of what Jesus says: "Wide is the gate that leads to life and narrow is the gate that leads to hell." And that is because they fall into the trap of judging by external appearance.

"Johnny was a good boy... he certainly is in heaven." Is being a good boy what gets you into heaven?

Let me be clear. We are not the judge over life and death. Only Jesus holds that honor. We cannot see faith. It is not our job to judge whether someone has gone to heaven or hell.

What can we do?

We can trust in the Word of our Lord: “He who believes and is baptized is saved.” (Mk 16:16) Faith in Jesus is the difference. We cannot see faith, but God doesn’t see as man sees. He sees into the heart, that is, He sees faith!

The Word, or as Abraham puts it, “Moses and the Prophets,” is how we come to believe.

The fool despises the Word of God. To his eternal destruction.

The Christian clings to the Word of God.

Let us cling to the Word of God that makes us wise unto salvation.

Let us share the Word of God with our neighbor which is the only way that they will be saved.

Your works don’t convert anyone. Your works may turn someone off from hearing the Word of God, but they don’t save them. Only the Word does that as Paul says, “Faith comes by hearing and hearing through the Words of Christ.” (Rom 10:17)

So let us be zealous in sharing the same Word that converted us as we strive to serve our neighbor in love. God will surely bless that Word when and where He wills.

In Jesus’ name. Amen.