



Sunday, September 28, 2025
Luke 16:19-31(Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost)

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Tony Acompanado

Whatever happens, happens. Now if you know anything about me then you know that I'm not one who gets frazzled or panicked easily, and I don't generally worry about much. I think that's because I like to be prepared. Perhaps that's why I love what the poet Wendell Berry wrote, "*Whatever happens, those who have learned to love one another have made their way into the lasting world and will not leave, whatever happens.*"

A lot can happen in this life. Unexpected joys. Unwelcome challenges. There are many twists and turns that each of us will encounter throughout our life, and at times it can all get pretty unnerving. But whatever happens along the way, our task remains the same – to learn that we are loved. To learn how to love. To learn to return that love to God. And to learn how to share that love with one another. And if we *have learned this*, then we have also learned how to live as God intended.

So what does this have to do with today's gospel reading? Well, the story I just read about the parable that Jesus tells in today's gospel from Luke is about a rich man who has failed to do this essential task – he hasn't learned to love his neighbor. His neighbor is a poor man named Lazarus, who lays at the rich man's gate hungry and covered in sores. And he's ignored by the rich man. Every day the rich man walks by his gate, ignoring this poor man in need.

When the rich man in this parable dies, he's buried and sent to Hades. He doesn't make his way to the lasting world of love and peace. *Why?* Not because he hoarded his wealth – at least it doesn't explicitly say this – but rather, it seems it's because he never learned to love his neighbor as himself.

The rich man lived a comfortable life. Dressed in the finest clothes and feasted on the finest foods. The world he lived in would have called him blessed. And in some ways, he was. But not in the way that truly mattered. At his gate, day after day, lay this poor man, Lazarus, that the rich man didn't see, didn't love, and didn't help. And so, when the rich man died, he found himself being tormented in Hades. But when poor Lazarus died, he was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham.

It's a touching story that Jesus tells. But why did he tell it? What was he trying to teach those who first heard it, and those of us who hear it today? Well I think the meaning of this story depends a lot on who's hearing it. I have no doubt that there are countless Christians hearing this story today, in this church and churches all around the world, who will hear it differently from most of us. Brothers and sisters that Jesus would refer to as, "the least of these".

They're children of God who don't have enough to eat, or a roof over their head. They don't have adequate health care. They don't feel safe in their home, or in their country. They seem to miss out on the good things in this life, just as did Lazarus, simply because of where they were born, or what they look like, or other circumstances that they may have no control over.

There are many people who will hear this story today and find great comfort in it. They will be reminded, that no matter how poor you are, how unloved and unwanted you are, no matter what this life has done to you – you are loved by God, you are wanted by God, and there *will be a day* when you, too, will be carried away by the angels to be with Jesus.

Many will hear this story and relate to Lazarus because he reminds us that God promises to help the poor, the forgotten, and the overlooked. God knows their names, and loves them, and promises that *there will come a day* when they will have enough to eat, when their tears will be dried, and their pain taken away, and when they will rest in God's love forever. What a beautiful message for all those who have been beaten down by life.

But this story wasn't told by Jesus just for them. It was also told for all of us – for people who probably have more in common with the unnamed rich man than with poor Lazarus. And if this story doesn't make most



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of us feel a little uncomfortable, then we might be missing something. Because this story serves as a warning to us that if we don't learn to love our neighbor here, in this life, then we can't depend on learning it in the next life.

It's clear in this story that the rich man, even after death, has not learned to love. When he sees Lazarus with Abraham, he doesn't show any remorse for how he ignored him in this life. He doesn't have regret. He continues to fail to treat Lazarus as a person, as an equal, as one deserving of compassion and regard. Even in the next life, the rich man treats Lazarus as he would a servant.

He even asks Abraham to "send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water" and cool his tongue. He doesn't even have the courtesy to address Lazarus directly, but instead he turns to powerful Abraham, because that's how he still sees the world. Convince Abraham, the man in charge, to order poor Lazarus to serve him and help him out.

This rich man still hasn't learned. Not in this life, and not in the next. So Jesus seems to be telling us that **the task of learning to love needs to happen here and it needs to happen now**. And if it doesn't happen here and now, we can't count on it happening in the next life.

To his credit, the rich man *does* ask Abraham to send Lazarus to his brothers, to warn them. But Abraham says, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them." In other words, they already have God's word. They should know that God wants them to love our neighbor. This isn't rocket science. It isn't special information that only some are privileged to hear. They should know this...and we should too! But sometimes, we need a reminder. So Jesus tells this story to remind us. To teach us – to learn to love, to notice those who are in need, and to find ways to love them.

Jesus tells this particular story to some Pharisees, who are described as lovers of money, just a few verses before today's reading. According to Jesus, they're people who justify themselves in the sight of others. In other words, the people that Jesus tells this story to are people who need to change, and who need to learn to love their neighbor.

And I imagine this must have shocked them, because *they* believed that those who were rich were *more* blessed by God, and those who were poor only had what was coming to them. They were completely wrong about this. So he told them this story to help them see things from a new perspective. And the story is meant to help *us* in this same way.

It continues to remind us that our most important task in this life is to learn to love God, and to love one another. This is our mission – to love God, and to love our neighbor. Extending out into our families, friends, churches, schools, workplaces, communities, and throughout the world. To the poor man laying at the gate. To the weary stranger. To the hungry, the lonely, the grieving, the addicted, the immigrant, and the lost.

My friends, let me remind you that this is a parable not a prediction, and we have the power to rewrite the ending. Like the rich man's five brothers, we have been given all the warning we need.

And I wonder if the best thing we could learn from this parable comes to us in an unexpected lesson from the rich man. Because I'm struck by how small the requests are that the rich man makes – a drop of water, a messenger to tell others. Perhaps *we* might be the ones to fulfill these very requests, bringing a bit of relief to others and telling everyone we meet that God desires that we care for each other.

This parable is calling us to confront ourselves and our practices. So what if we did that by opening the gates of compassion and concern for others, generosity and sharing, healing and wholeness, forgiveness and



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reconciliation, justice and peace? It really is pretty simple. We just have to learn to love. And if we do, then having a *whatever happens, happens* attitude wouldn't feel so unsettling. Fortunately for us, our teacher has already shown us the way. Thanks be to God! Amen.