

NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

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As a loving Father, God always meets us wherever we are, with whatever we need.

- This is so important to remember because his love and mercy take on all kinds of different forms, which we can sometimes have trouble recognizing.
- For example, as quickly as our hearts cry out for him to comfort us in our affliction, we are not nearly so eager to be afflicted when we've grown too comfortable.

It's not usually clear to us how badly we need them both, and so Jesus uses several sharp contrasts in his parable to bring this into focus.

- On one hand, we have the rich man, living like a king in a castle; clothed in purple and fine linen and feasting sumptuously every day.
- On the other we have Lazarus, a poor man lying at his gate; clothed in sores and longing just for scraps from the rich man's table.

But then they die and everything changes – the rich man is buried, and finds himself tormented in eternity,

- while Lazarus is carried by angels to the comfort of "Abraham's bosom," which we might think of as lounging in the lobby while he waited for the elevator to heaven.
- Before it was Lazarus longing for mercy from the rich man, now it's the rich man pleading for Lazarus to help him and his brothers.

And so we're presented with something striking:

- If we imagine ourselves in the place of the rich man, our first thought is to wish that we'd been afflicted in our comfort *just as much* as Lazarus had longed to for comfort in his affliction.
- We think, "Why didn't somebody say something?" To which, in this parable, Abe might reply, "You're kidding, right?"

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You see, we spend our whole lives here on earth becoming who we will be in eternity.

- The choices we make, what we do with the blessings we receive, how we respond to suffering, and so on, all create deeply-ingrained patterns of thought and behavior.
- It seems unlikely that a lifetime of selfish choices will somehow ultimately prepare us to choose to serve for all eternity the God who declares his power chiefly by showing mercy and pity.

We see this in the parable, where Jesus tells us that the poor man's name was Lazarus, while the rich man remains anonymous.

- Knowing someone's name, calling them by name cherishes their dignity and signals a connection.
- In this world it's easy, when we're comfortable, to let the poor and the needy remain faceless, anonymous.

That's what we see with the rich man.

- He had the picture of absolute human misery sitting right in front of him, day after day.
- But instead of letting himself be afflicted, the man hardened his heart.
- Even the smallest act of mercy would have gone a long way, but there was no connection – Lazarus was just someone to be stepped over on his way somewhere else.
- The rich man's habit of reducing people to what they can offer him is so ingrained that even when their roles are reversed, the rich man's instinct is still to ask for *Lazarus* to serve *him*!

All of this serves to bring out a vital point of the parable: the afflicted need the mercy of the comfortable, yes; but the comfortable need to be afflicted even more.

- Sure, Lazarus could've really used the rich man's comfort and mercy, but ultimately he's still in great shape.
- The rich man ignored Lazarus, he was totally indifferent to the suffering around him, and ultimately, he's *not* OK.

Don't let yourself fall prey to the idea that you have anything good that didn't come as a gift from God.

- The natural gifts and talents that you have? They're God-given, as is the context that makes them valuable. (Bill Gates is obviously a pretty sharp guy – but would he have been the richest man in the world if he'd been born into an episode of *Game of Thrones*? Unlikely.)
- Have you benefited from your upbringing and close relationships? These are people that God brought into your life.
- What if you haven't had any advantages, worked hard for everything you've gotten? Even just the capacity to work hard is a gift – there are a lot of people that want to work hard and they're not physically able or don't have the opportunity.

Everything we have has been given by God as a gift. The question then is, why? Why?

- What does God want you to do with it?
- Why has God put you in contact with the people he has?

We have to ask these questions or we risk ending up like the rich man – who was in torment

- not because of his wealth, but his refusal to share it;
- not because he was powerful, but because he was indifferent to the suffering right in front of him.

So let this parable get under your skin a little, let it make you uncomfortable – it's supposed to.

- Jesus is pointing us to God the Father, who doesn't condemn the material, but gives life to all things.
- And if we imitate him, seeking to do good, to be rich in good deeds, to be generous and ready to share,
- We can begin, even now, to take hold of the life which is life indeed.