

A sermon preached at St. George's Anglican Church and Prince of Faith Lutheran Church, Calgary, by the Rev. Clara King, September 25, 2016.

Proper 26 – Year C

Luke 16:19-31

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts, be always acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

There was a certain rich man, who dressed like royalty and had a banquet festival every single day – or rather, banquet festivals were his ordinary everyday life; banqueting was how he lived!

And there was a certain poor man, who was so poor and so sick that he couldn't even sit up and beg any longer. So some kind friends placed him outside the rich man's gate, expecting that the rich man would show him some kind of charity, as Moses and the Prophets teach that everyone must care for the poor as their own family members. But even though the rich man knew the name of the man outside his gate, he did not listen to Moses and the Prophets and he did not care for Lazarus. His dogs did, though: they kept Lazarus company outside the gate, and bathed his wounds with their saliva, which was considered a medicine in the ancient world.

The two characters died. Lazarus was carried up to be with Father Abraham, to be comforted and cared for by him, and to rest upon his bosom at the Great Banquet of Heaven, like the beloved disciple rested upon Jesus' bosom at the Last Supper in John's Gospel.

And meanwhile the rich man was taken down to Hades to be tormented. He looked up and saw Lazarus resting on the bosom of Father Abraham and feasting – but did he repent? no. Did he understand the consequences for his actions? no. He asked Father Abraham to send Lazarus to serve him. Father Abraham refuses, trying to help the man understand: while you received your comforts in life, Lazarus now receives his comforts in death.

Did the rich man understand even then how his choices in life had affected Lazarus? No, for the rich man then asked Father Abraham to send Lazarus, like a page boy, to warn his brothers so they will not be tormented likewise. And Father Abraham reminded him: they have Moses and the Prophets to teach them, just as you did, – they should listen to them.

And the rich man, still unable to get the pointed hint, says in effect, “but no one listens to Moses and the Prophets! But to a warning about Hell, they’ll listen!” And Father Abraham replies, “if they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, no one rising from the dead will convince them.”

The rich man – and his brothers - have everything they need to live a righteous life: they have all the information, all the resources they need to make faithful, well-informed choices. There is nothing that they lack: not even a resurrection appearance can add to the wealth of information they have about how to live a good, faithful, righteous life. Yes, this rich man had it all: he had the financial resources, he had all the teaching, and he even had the opportunity. But in the hands of this rich man, all that wealth and all that teaching count for nothing because he never put it into action to care for poor Lazarus.

We never hear what kind of life Lazarus leads – because the story isn’t about earning your way into Heaven: in the latter Jewish scriptures, entrance into heaven is a free gift, granted to all the faithful. Rather, the story is about how the rich man failed to live a faithful life – though he was fully informed about what that would involve.

We also are fully informed. We also have Moses and the Prophets – and the Gospels and Epistles as well. We also inherit those instructions to care for the poor and the widow and the orphan and the stranger in the land. And we also are informed by Jesus’ unrelenting commitment to the poor. We already have all the resources we need to live righteous lives.

In this parable, the problem isn’t the message, the problem is that people don’t listen. One of the brothers at Taize commented to me this summer, “it’s amazing how fixated some people can get about things Jesus never spoke about, while they completely ignore or allegorize things that Jesus clearly cared about very deeply, and spoke about at length.”

This parable challenges us: how do we put our faith into action? Strikingly, this parable also tells us, it’s not that difficult.

When I was younger, I used to feel that I could be an amazing Christian if only I went on a mission trip to Africa; if only I took vows of poverty and service and became a nun; if only I could devote my life to the poor – then I could be an amazing Christian. And in a beautiful highly-dramatic way, I longed for an opportunity to be *that kind* of Christian. But like the rich man, God places in our

own lives and in our ordinary circumstances opportunities to put our faith into action.

There is no such thing as being too young or too old or too poor or too busy or too infirm to put our faith into action. Any reason, any excuse that we might have can be overcome, if we prioritize our faith and invite God to transform our lives. No poor people dying at your gate? Don't worry, God sees opportunities for you to live out your faith somewhere in your life. No food to spare? Don't worry, God sees opportunities for you. Too busy with work and kids? Don't worry, God sees opportunities for you. It is only our lack of imagination that stops us from seeing and realizing all the opportunities that surround us all the time to live into our faith more deeply.

“Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbour as yourself?” we are asked in our Baptism. And we answer, “we will, with God’s help.” Well friends, I don’t know about you, but this is a huge challenge in my life: there is no day that goes by when I couldn’t take at least one next step on this journey, when I couldn’t cry out for God’s help just a little more often. Seek and serve Christ in *all persons* – that’s a lot of people; and who is my neighbour? Everyone. Loving everyone equally to how I love myself.

It’s not that I’m uninformed; it’s not that I don’t have opportunities; it’s that it’s hard, and it’s scary, and for some reason, I keep trying to do it on my own. But God doesn’t need us to do it on our own: God just needs us to be *willing to try*: God will be there with us, every step of the way, coaxing and encouraging us, and ready to celebrate with us when we reach that next plateau in the journey. God stands by, ready to help, waiting for us to reach our hands out to his, and take that next, shaky step.

All of us live lives that are confusing, complicated, compromised and sometimes downright complacent – all of us have days, years or even decades when we say, “I won’t – not even with God’s help!” But God keeps calling to us because God has a vision for us and for our lives and for the lives of everyone of God’s children, all the people on this planet, and for the plants and animals and for Creation itself – God has a vision, and God aspires for each and every one of us to be part of that vision, to take our place at the great banquet of celebration in which everyone and everything will be equally welcome – and God calls us to be part of bringing that vision into being.

And so friends, being fully informed, let us say yes to God’s help, and find our opportunities to act. **Amen.**