

As many of you know, this summer I had to privilege of travelling to Minnesota with 29 of our Senior High Youth. Our theme throughout the trip was “Justified”, and we used Paul’s letter to the Galatians as the basis for our conversations and our time together. The point in all of it, in our worship and Bible study and service, was that in Christ, we are justified. We are eternally loved by God as we are and for who we will become. And because we are justified, we are free from the things that bind us, that attempt to redefine us or shape our identity, and we are also free for the life that God intends for us, the life of loving and serving God by loving and serving our neighbors.

And, yet, so often in life we have this constant pressure to do more and to be more. Because we can become easily convinced that our justification – our status, value, worth, prestige, however you want to phrase it – where we stand in the eyes of others matters just as much, if not more, than the freedom we have through Christ. How we compare to others means a lot to us as human beings and it’s not just a senior high/youth thing. This is an everyone thing. And the more power and influence we give to the world, the more we allow our lives be to shaped and driven by the things the world tells us are important, the more we risk forgetting our identity as beloved children of God, the more we risk the freedom we have in Christ. And this is a big part of what Jesus is trying to help us understand in this parable today.

So let’s talk about this oh so wonderful parable. And first, let’s talk about what it is not. It is not a parable about rich and poor. Shocking, right? But it isn’t about the evils of being rich or the virtues of being poor and if we insist on making it strictly about wealth and poverty, there is little good news to be had in Jesus’ words. It is not a parable that chastises those who have, as if to signal that having wealth is itself inherently evil. And because of that, it is also not a parable about the afterlife. It isn’t intended to depict what happens after death – at least not in the ways we usually think of it, where those who are good go to heaven and those who are bad go to hell. We have to see beyond the vivid imagery, to set aside our preconceived ideas and anxieties, and hear what that what Jesus is saying is filled with deep love and concern for God’s beloved.

Because this is about God’s beloved. It’s about you and me and everyone. And it’s about the vast contrast between the will of God and the will of the world. It is about the impenetrable gap that exists between the promise of life in Christ and the promises of so-called life that we are bombarded with every day. In short, it’s about the heart. Our hearts. It’s about the ways that our hearts can become smitten with so many things that emptily promise us better, the ways that our hearts can be deceived into giving value to things that ultimately do not matter, the ways that our

hearts, created by God and for God, can become consumed with our own interests and our own comfort. This is a parable about when our hearts lose their way.

The problem with the rich man is not that he’s rich, but that he has become so consumed with his wealth and status and self-preservation that he can no longer see his neighbor. He has become so in love with his own justification in the eyes of others, his own prestige and value and lifestyle, that he cannot hear his brother Lazarus pleading at his own gate. His heart has become so infatuated with the promises of luxury and comfort, that he has forgotten that by the grace of God he came into the world with nothing and from nothing and that one day, there will be nothing in this world to give his life value and meaning and purpose except the grace of God. What he has and what success he has achieved does not matter if his heart has no room for love of God and love of neighbor.

Because ultimately, that’s what this is really about. It’s about the basics of living out the Christian faith and the things that can get in the way of living the abundant life God intends for us and for all. Wealth in itself is not inherently evil or wrong. Having social status itself is not inherently wrong. Seeking comfort in life is not inherently bad. But our pursuit of these things can distract us from what really matters. They can trick our hearts into believing that all of these things will bring us happiness, contentment, joy, peace – you name it. This is a parable for the five brothers. It’s a parable for us. This is a parable for our hearts and in it is a call to check where we’re at with these things – to check our intentions and motivations. Because the way we are called to live, the way to life that really is life – it’s all there. We know what God expects of us through the law and prophets. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. Love God and love your neighbor.

So today’s parable is really an opportunity. It’s an opportunity for us to remember that all we have and all we are is because of God. It’s an opportunity to remember we are justified, that we are precious in the sight of God and we don’t have to join this reckless pursuit of proving our value or worth. It’s an opportunity to remember our responsibility to our neighbors. It’s an opportunity to remember what real life in Christ is about, that there are far greater things than all this.

Jesus once said, “Where your treasure is, your heart will follow.” May our hearts remain fixed on the grace and love of Jesus Christ, that we would always remember we are justified and called beloved, that all we have is a gift to be shared, and that the greatest way we can love God is to live the life that really is life, wholly committed to the love and service our neighbors. Amen.