

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 26
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
10:45 a.m. Sunday, September 26, 2010

Amos 6:1a, 4-7; Psalm 146;
1 Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31

Before I get started, I want to make sure that I say thank you for the welcome you have extended, and I bring you greetings from the Gettysburg Seminary. This congregation is a wonderful partner to Gettysburg Seminary, and I am so pleased to be here with you this morning and thank you for this opportunity to work with you.

This parable, I think, like so many other stories in the Bible, is more complex and more complicated, than it appears at first reading. What often happens after hearing this story is that Christians draw two primary conclusions. First, there is a literal place called Heaven, located somewhere specific, and there is a literal place called Hell, located somewhere else specific.

Second, good people end up in heaven and bad people end up in hell. It is pretty straightforward, right. Well, actually, when we examine this text more closely, we find that there are a couple of problems with these two conclusions.

First, I don't think that any of us actually imagine that this specific picture is what heaven really looks like. Literally, the group reads that Lazarus was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom. Is that where you want to go when you die? And, who made Abraham the boss of heaven anyway. I don't tend to think of Abraham calling the shots in heaven, do you? What about this chasm between heaven and hades? Apparently it isn't too wide because people can shout back and forth across it, and even see each other. I don't know about you, but my image of heaven does not include a front row seat to the torments of hell.

Then there is another problem. Did you notice that nothing is said about anyone's faith in the story? When it comes to the rationale of who ends up where, it appears that the decision is made primarily, if not exclusively, on what each person has done. That is, how each person has lived his life. Does anyone really want that to be the criteria for anyone's salvation or damnation? I don't, especially when I take a closer look at the rich man. If I am honest with myself, I know that I am much more like the rich man than I am like Lazarus. Dressing nicely, eating well every day, aren't you? Is anyone here regularly begging daily on the streets for their next meal, with dogs licking open wounds on your body? Doesn't look like it from up here?

So it seems this way. This story when at first seems to reinforce some of our traditional thinking about heaven and hell and the afterlife, becomes a very different text for us actually. In fact, I would argue that it becomes a very terrible word of law for us. A word that convicts us of our sin. You see, in this story, I am

the rich man. I deserve damnation. Like the rich man, I have ignored the needed poor at my doorstep, and I have consumed far more than my fair share of the world's resources. Comes as quite a shock, doesn't it?

Christians are used to feeling pretty smug about heaven and hell, I think. We take our place in heaven for granted, and we see consign others to hell without another thought. But this story conveys to us that things are not quite so simple. If we want to think about others being in hell, based on what they do, or do not do, we should first take seriously the fact, that we deserve hell ourselves, based on what we do, or do not do. Based on the way we treat our neighbors. This is an uncomfortable conclusion that should make us squirm when the judgment that we reserve for others, comes back and falls upon our own heads.

Nevertheless, we can take heart, because we are not left in this vulnerable uncomfortable position, by no means. The fact is, our salvation is not in doubt and our place in heaven is secure. But, and this is the key point here, the reason for our confidence and our security is not found in our own lives, not in our church attendance, not in our volunteer work, and not in our tithing. They are all wonderful things, of course they are. But, none of them have one wit to do with our salvation. The only reason we can be confident of our salvation, the only reason we can be sure our place in heaven, is Jesus Christ. We are saved, not because we are such great people and we deserve it, we don't. We are saved because our lives have been joined to Jesus Christ, and in Jesus Christ we have been forgiven, redeemed, and given new life.

Have you ever wondered why in the Apostle's Creed, we confess that Jesus descended into the dead, or in some versions it reads, descended into hell? Wouldn't that add to our belief that He was crucified, died and was buried, and on the third day arose and ascended into heaven? That short little phrase, descended into the dead or descended into hell. What difference does that make in the larger picture of our confession? What would we lose if it was not there? Well, I would like to suggest that we can best understand the meaning of that little phrase when we look at a story like this morning's Gospel text. If this story drives me to realize that I deserve condemnation for my sins, the sin that I committed against my neighbor, our confession that Jesus Christ descended into hell, reminds me that in spite of my guilt, in spite of my offense, Jesus has rescued me.

Jesus has lifted me out of the pit, covered me with his loving embrace, and brought me into eternal life with God. Jesus has done that saving work for me. Work that I could not do on my own. In his descent into hell, Jesus has filled the most godforsaken, godless space imaginable, a place of torment, despairs and other desolations, with the loving, saving presence of the divine, transforming hell forever. What a magnificent image, a glorious confirmation of how much God loves us, how much God cares for us. That God would come into the depths of hell, seeking us out, and not abandoning us to our sinfulness. Instead, God raises us up

into the very heart of God. Such grace we do not deserve, and yet it comes to us freely, joyfully, and abundantly.

With the knowledge then of this astounding grace, we are free to live differently. We do not have to worry about keeping score, wondering if we have done enough to earn ourselves a place in the bosom of Abraham. Nor, do we have to keep our eyes on our neighbors, taking upon ourselves the responsibility of assigning them a place in heaven or hell. It is not really our job, is it? Instead we can live exuberantly, lovingly, generously, in thanksgiving to God and in care and compassion for our neighbor. Not because we have to, but because we can. Not to earn a reward, but as a joyful response to what has already been given to us.

I would like to suggest, what's more, we can live trusting that we have been saved, but also hopeful that all will be saved. Why not? We can't know for sure. It is not our decision, it is not our call, but personally I like the idea that God's amazing grace is so lavish, and that Christ's pearly hotel is so pervasive that no one, no one, needs to fear being permanently and everlastingly separated from God. After all, if God chose to save a wretch like me, surely for God all things are possible. Even for the rich man.

Thanks be to God! Amen.