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Trinity 1 One Year Series 2017

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Trinity I – One Year Series

Luther

3. However, this warning spoken for the sake of the Pharisees on that occasion availed as little as do warnings addressed to rich and arrogant people of the world today. Unfortunately, as we know, such people most often think themselves pious and without greed. Vice has been turned into virtue. Greed nowadays has come to be viewed as talented, smart, careful stewardship. And as with greed, so sin in general is dressed up to look like virtue and not vice. Murder and harlotry, perhaps, are still considered sinful in some quarters, but other sins have in general come to be viewed more as virtues than vices. That is particularly the case with greed, now so dressed up and polished as no longer to be denominated as such. Neither prince nor peasant, nobleman nor average citizen is any longer considered greedy, but only upstanding, the common consensus being that the man who prudently provides for himself is resourceful person who knows how to take care of himself.

4. The same holds true for other sins; Pride is no longer pride, or sin, but honor. The proud man is no longer deemed arrogant but honorable, a commanding person, worthy of respect, a credit to his generation. Anger and envy are no longer that, or sin, but righteousness, zealousness, and virtue. The man who storms, or is envious, or who loses his cool is now considered industrious, with a passion for what is fair, and justly angry when high-handed injustice is done to him. Thus there are no more sinners in the world, but – God have mercy! – the world is full of holy people. In Seneca's words, when this happens, that vice is turned into virtue and honor, there no longer is hope or a way out, everything is lost.

(*Sermons of Martin Luther: The House Postils*, Vol. 2. Ed.: Eugene Klug. Baker, 1996. p. 224.)

This paragraph of Luther's commentary on the Gospel for today really struck me. First of all, I think modern Americans might be shocked at Luther's critique of capitalism today. Remember he joined a mendicant order, an order which insisted that the true apostolic life involved renouncing all possessions. It was a commune of sorts. Certain quarters of medieval society saw the mendicants as sort of irresponsible hippies that dreamed of a world where nobody owned anything. Luther's own father may have been one of those sorts of people who thought that about the order his son joined.

Luther's words on greed and pride are perhaps even truer today than they were in the 16th century. Certainly the people rioting (storming) recently in Portland over perceived injustices could fit very well into Luther's characterization as people who are zealous for social justice and therefore their riotous behavior is acceptable. They would likely be rather put out by his criticism of them in the second paragraph. Human nature is a weasel which tries to make vice into a virtue so we can look at ourselves and be smug. But it is not just progressive and radical Portlanders who have done this.

How have 21st century conservative suburban Lutherans done the same thing? Have we created a Jesus who looks just like us, tamed him so that he does not criticize our comfortable lives? Does he condemn the fact that we drive by the homeless and poor on our way to Starbucks, work, and the gym? Remember, Luther became abjectly poor, a beggar, a guy with a placard beside the road begging for money. That is what Augustinian friars did. He took a radical step which most of us consider unthinkable. Does that give him a word to say to us today about how we have called greed a virtue, formed entities like Thrivent to give it a Christian cast, and not asked the question about whether our money has become our God? We insist on faith alone but put far more attention into our 401k's than we do our neighbor's need. John's words in the epistle reading might be helpful for the preacher today.

Luther would go on to renounce the idea that he was earning any points with God through his monastic vows and life. He left the monastery, it is true, but I am not sure he ever renounced fully that young idealistic man who joined the Augustinian commune because he wanted to live the apostolic life like Jesus.

Collect of the Day

O God, the strength of all who trust in You, mercifully accept our prayers; and because through the weakness of our mortal nature we can do no good thing, grant us Your grace to keep Your commandments that we may please You in both will and deed; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Again, as we have seen before, this prayer makes an assumption that is contrary to our culture. We are, in fact, not the self-reliant autocrats that we think we are. In truth, we are helpless and pitiable beings who are unable to choose the good things to do or accomplish any of them and utterly subject to forces internal and external to ourselves which we cannot control. We are in need of God's gracious help even to please God in will or deed. All the work we think we have done on our own is so much displeasing failure in relationship to God. He has to rescue this situation, he must sign the adoption papers. He must hire the attorney; he must make the sacrifice of his Son to gain children for himself this way. We cannot declare him to be our God, he must declare us to be his children.

This is not the message that our world willingly hears. Either it has said that we are able to do the good and thus approach God as his worthy child, or it denies that there is any real good to do. It is a dog eat dog world and you need to take care of number one because no one else will.

How will our congregations pray this prayer? It won't be an easy sell. If there is any place that we like to assert our "independence" it is in matters financial and the Gospel reading takes on that very issue. We want to be the ones who decide how the money is spent and we like exert control with our money. If you have ever written a grant you know how this works. The folks with the money aren't just giving it away; they are controlling how it is spent. We can applaud that as responsible management of funds and giving, but we cannot call it gracious. It is the ways of the

world that Jesus contradicts throughout his ministry. Jesus is going to talk about another giving that is not controlling or an exercise of power. He will discuss the giving which God gives, the giving of true grace.

The preacher may also want to remember the great risk of forgiveness today. There is no guarantee, and as soon as you seek that guarantee; you are outside the realm of grace and in the realm of law. I cannot start to lay down rules with my neighbor and demand that he follow them before I forgive him. If I do, I might control his behavior, at least while I am watching, but have not forgiven him, and I will not win his heart. The graciousness of God runs this terrible risk. We might just abuse it. Will we?

Readings

Genesis 15:1-6

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.”² But Abram said, “O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?”³ And Abram said, “Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.”⁴ And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: “This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.”⁵ And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”⁶ And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

Abraham is our father in faith, and this can be really good news. He is not particularly good at it sometimes. Abram has been given a promise but he seems to be trying to make the promise come true himself. He has an heir but it is not according to the promise. This heir, Eliezar, seems to have been a trusted servant, a member of his household or he may have been some distant nephew. Many have pointed out that Abram on several occasions tries to make the promise come true on his own terms or seems to have been willing to let it go. He will also take Hagar and produce a son in an attempt to create the heir that Sarah seemed unable to give him. When he journeyed to Egypt he was willing to let Sarah go in the harem of Pharaoh. But God will have none of this. The promise of God is true and sure, even if the body is dead and the ability to produce an heir seems far-fetched if not impossible.

When God pushes the point, Abram believes and it is credited to him as righteousness, but I think it is important to notice that he doesn't start out in this passage as the exemplar of unshakeable faith we often make him out to be. He seems to be working the system to give God a little boost as though God might need such assistance. It is clear that God is not meeting Abram's expectations.

But the preacher will want to ask what promise does God make to us in this regard? I believe the Gospel lesson articulates it well for us, but it is here too. Descendants as numerous as the stars – we are those descendants of Abraham. And yet, as his children, we are also part of that promise

of future heirs. Look around our congregations and many of them are gray. The young people are notably absent. Will we have the spiritual heirs or have they run off seeking some greener pasture in a non-denominational church? Is God calling us to such radical faith as well? What does that look like for us?

What of that promise that his kingdom will prevail even against the gates of Hell. When an addict or an alcoholic sits in our office, their life in shambles and desperately reaching out for any straw, even God, and when that person stares into our eyes from across the desk, do we already know how this will end, even before it begins? Do we expect/trust only in failure? Do we believe that God could help this person or do we see only their weakness and inability sitting before us? Or perhaps the problem is not that we don't admit that God could help this person, we are not sure that God will. I can believe that the boat is going to New York, am I willing to buy the ticket and entrust my money and my life to that captain and his vessel? We probably all will admit that God can do it, but do we trust his mercy?

What is God challenging us to believe? What has God promised us that we find it a challenge to believe? We have asked the question before. Here are a few things we thought when we talked about this before. Can we add to this list?

- 1. God's Word is the voice of God – He promises that this Eucharistic meal forgives my sins, gives me eternal life. Can I really yawn while I stand in line on the way to the rail?*
- 2. God does not count beans or sins – he loves stinkers as much as the good guys.*
- 3. No one comes to the Father except through Jesus – yes, Christianity is important. There is no promise of salvation outside the faithful relationship. There is really a condemnation for the unbeliever. But the enemy has been saying “You shall not surely die...” for a very long time. It is culturally unacceptable to say that anyone goes to Hell or that there is any real consequence for our failures of confession and misbelief.*
- 4. Easter means the end of death and taxes.*
- 5. This world is not out of God's control/power. He is not impotent before the forces of nature, decay, death, and darkness. God might not do anything about it in our eyes, but that is not because he cannot. It often looks like the world is careening out of control. It looks like our lives are but pawns in the games of forces which seemingly control the world, but God says, “Don't be afraid, I am the Lord of heaven and earth.”*
- 6. Jesus the answer to sin – he is the Son of God and his death upon a cross makes a real and positive difference in my life and this whole world. I am afraid before my own self, my own sin, but God says, “don't be afraid – he has gone to that cross for you.)*
- 7. More?*

¹² Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD,
the people whom he has chosen as his heritage!
¹³ The LORD looks down from heaven;
he sees all the children of man;
¹⁴ from where he sits enthroned he looks out
on all the inhabitants of the earth,
¹⁵ he who fashions the hearts of them all
and observes all their deeds.
¹⁶ The king is not saved by his great army;
a warrior is not delivered by his great strength.
¹⁷ The war horse is a false hope for salvation,
and by its great might it cannot rescue.
¹⁸ Behold, the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him,
on those who hope in his steadfast love,
¹⁹ that he may deliver their soul from death
and keep them alive in famine.
²⁰ Our soul waits for the LORD;
he is our help and our shield.
²¹ For our heart is glad in him,
because we trust in his holy name.
²² Let your steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us,
even as we hope in you.

I John 4:16-21

¹⁶ So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. ¹⁷ By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world. ¹⁸ There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. ¹⁹ We love because he first loved us. ²⁰ If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. ²¹ And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.

This passage presents a bit of a challenge to faith alone Lutherans in North America. It should not, and the idea that faith does not result in love would be alien to John and the rest of the NT authors, but here we are. Too often our churches are known as faith communities defined by our conflicts and what we reject, not by love.

John's audience were incipient Gnostics who had succumbed to a particular synchronism with Greek culture. They looked at the terribly broken world around them and through that God must surely have nothing to do with that. God must only be interested in the spiritual, the non-physical

world of the mind, the spirit, and the ethereal. Death meant that they would leave the physical behind and be liberated from the carnal to be pure spirits in communion with the creator.

But this ignores some critical facts of Christianity. Jesus died a real and very physical death to save the world which God made. He shed red, sticky, salty blood because God was not willing to abandon his creation to sin and death and the Devil. Jesus had become flesh to save humans as humans, not as some disembodied spirits.

But Gnosticism also had a very convenient element which John realized and must have seen. If God is only interested in the spiritual side of us, the physical problems people face are not really an issue. If my neighbor is hungry, that is a physical problem and hence not really on God's radar or mine. I can walk right by the hungry, naked, poor, downtrodden fellow and be secure in my spiritual goodness.

John rejects this. God is love. Now, the devil has been working overtime to subvert this for us and he has done an excellent job of subverting the notion of love in western culture. When John uses this word "love" he does not mean the emotion most of us have in mind. Jesus said, "Love your enemy." He does not mean gin up some nice feelings for him. He means that if the enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is without enough to wear on a winter day, give him some clothes. That is loving the neighbor. Jesus does not order us to like the man, only to love him. I have very little control over my emotions and what I like. What I do with the spare pair of shoes in my closet, on the other hand, I can control.

John makes some amazing statements about this today which bear careful consideration individually and as a group.

- 1. God is love – the Gnostic would have said God is knowledge or at least to access God requires knowledge and some spiritual discernment. But John's revelation of God here made God into something that every slave and every simpleton can access. Any slave can love. Indeed, some of the most loving things I have seen have been in the wards of mental hospitals and by developmentally disabled people.*
- 2. Whoever abides in love abides in God and God abides in that person. While this is not contradicting sola fide it is certainly smashing the defacto nuda fide which pervades much of contemporary Lutheranism. We imagine that if we have asserted faith and left it there we have somehow checked off the box. But faith loves and without that love, we have to question the presence of faith. The love does not save us, God does that, but saved by God we love.*
- 3. That love gives us confidence on the day of judgment. Yes, it is Jesus love for us which means we come to judgment day forgiven, but that love living in us is a constant reminder that we are God's people who come to judgment day with confidence and peace. We look like our king, who has holes in his hands and feet and side indicated that he spent his life, loved us. We look like him somehow in that love. He took a child into his arms and*

blessed, so we do that. He cared for the sick, so we do that. He befriended the sinners and lonely people, so we do that.

4. *God's love casts out fear. To be perfected in love means we have not fear but courage. We do not fear punishment because God's love has taken the punishment away. That means we walk through this life differently than the world which cringes along afraid of God's wrath and the Devil's hellfire.*
5. *Love originates with God. Our love is a continuing embodiment of his love expressed in Jesus and poured out in Spirit.*
6. *Love is not optional for the Christian. If we confess that we love God but hate our brother we are liars. If we cannot the brother or sister who is at hand, we surely cannot love the God whom we cannot see. The command is absolute. To love God is to love our fellow human being.*

For John's initial audience and for the largely crypto-Gnostic modern protestant, this passage preaches a terrible message of judgment and law. But it also preaches a message of great hope and peace. God has given us love and love is not some heroic act. It is simply living the good that God has given us with the people whom he has led into our lives. The mundane, the simple, the loving hug, the casserole brought to a grieving neighbor, the word of encouragement, and the time spent prepping a Sunday School lesson are each evidence of God's presence in the life of the human being and the assurance that God has accepted us in Christ.

Sermon Idea: Living with the Love of God (That the Holy Spirit of God would shape the life of the hearer to embody the love of the Incarnate Christ.)

This sermon will note that we are both beloved and lovers, and that those two things are inextricably connected. To deny one is to deny the other. But John asserts this in a very doctrinal sense which may take some explanation for our people. Best, however, is not to explain it but to illustrate it.

John was dealing with a problem in the first century of some folks who made their faith far more rational and reasonable. God would not have truly entered the flesh, Jesus must have been a spirit. Some of them were docetists, folks who thought Jesus only "seemed" to be human. The Greek word "dokeo" (seem) gives its name to this movement. Others would adopt a de facto sort of Gnosticism in which Jesus had only really come to save our souls.

But John saw the lie in all this. As Gregory of Nazianzus would say about 300 years later as this issue continued to bubble throughout the Christian community: If Jesus did not take it up, he did not save it. If Jesus did not take up our humanity, in all its humanness he did not save it. But what John saw with crystal clarity is that when Jesus took up our humanity he enabled us to love our fellow human being in a different way. If Jesus only died to save our spirit/soul, then the suffering of my neighbor is just something to be escaped. Indeed, I might even justify allowing him to die because that would free his immortal soul from his body. Some have made this argument in the past. It is evil.

Jesus did come in the flesh and that means that my neighbor's humanity, in his/her suffering and in his/her rejoicing, has all been redeemed by Christ and it somehow ineffably connected to him. When I love him/her I am loving Jesus. The presence of Christ is not found in some right theology or some right spiritual attitude but it is seen in the love which Christians show to others. John simply won't let us spiritualize Jesus to the point where that is lost.

This sermon will dance dangerously close to edge of a cliff, but if it runs away from that cliff, it will not achieve safety because it will not proclaim the Gospel. The cliff is the idea that somehow our good works, our loving our neighbor, are absolutely necessary for our salvation. Crudely understood, this is simply works righteousness. But to run away from that precipice is to say that our works and the way we treat our neighbor are matters of indifference, perhaps sins which Jesus has forgiven, but otherwise disconnected from our salvation. It is only when we approach the cliff, tremulously looking over its edge, that we begin to see and live the reality that our works are in fact the living out of Jesus' love. Our love is not a matter of indifference. As John says here it is the very presence of God. Without God dwelling in us, we are lost, utterly and completely. But we cannot own that love as if it is ours without God. That too is another problem. So we must walk this edge, proclaiming the importance of love without turning it into something for which God rewards us.

I really think that this sort of a sermon calls for a story. Best would be a story of someone whom your congregation knew. Someone who lived out this love and in retrospect you can see the face of Jesus in that life lived. This sermon will want to point the hearer to the embodiment of theology in love. It is best not to make this into a form of hero worship. This should be a normal everyday sort of person, but someone in whom God abided and in some way we could see that. I can think of several from my parish ministry. I hope you can too.

The sermon will want to point to this person, help the hearer discern this face of Christ in the love of the other. Acknowledge that Christ took up a sinful humanity to himself. He is not ashamed to dwell with us. He is not tainted by our sin, but his holiness renders us pure. This love we see is not someone earning God's favor, it is the beautiful evidence of that favor proclaimed in baptism. The preacher will be careful here. This is not looking at the person for the person's sake, it is looking at the person in order to see Jesus because Jesus has kept his promise and abides with his people, and the eyes of faith can see Him. The preacher might effectively conclude this sermon by declaring that Jesus is seen the faces and hands and actions of this congregation. You might be excited to see what he has in store, a beautiful story to tell, as that love unfolds in this place. You might be eagerly anticipating what he will do.

The goal of the sermon is that in seeing Christ the hearer will turn to their neighbor and love with this Christ-love as well. This is a beautiful thing to see in another person and a beautiful thing to see in yourself. It is never perfect. Jesus does not call saints, he calls sinners and makes them saints. This takes time and it does not happen overnight, but baptism has begun a good work in us that Jesus is bringing to completion (Philippians 1:6). Seen through this lens, the mother who makes breakfast for her children, the father who coaches the little league team, the neighbor who

stops to talk to the old woman who lives down the street, or the student in the school who simply is gentle and kind with the awkward misfit in class is another embodiment of Christ. This is where Jesus shows up, not in the “spiritual” thing which is up in the clouds or immaterial. Jesus shows up in the love which inhabits our lives. That love is expressed to our closest family and friends, and to our enemies. It is expressed to strangers and the people we have known our whole lives.

Theology is calling it what it is. Theology helps us see it. The understanding empowers and makes it better, but it is Jesus who creates it and calls it into being. He has done that already in your baptism. He continues to do that in this word and in this sacrament. So take a good look, find the love, and see Jesus.

This would be a great confirmation sermon. The confirmand is often told by the world that his/her life has no real meaning. We are simply another human, a member of the species that is burdening this world. Our lives have no positive meaning, may in fact have a great deal of negative meaning as the world is burdened by too many human beings. This text tells that young person that his/her life is connected to Christ, he lives in us, he is found/located in the love. We can see Jesus in you.

Luke 16:19-31 (Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man) *I have included the verses which immediately precede this parable. I think they are critical to understanding it.*

¹⁶ *"The Law and the Prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it. ¹⁷But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void.*

¹⁸ *"Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.*

¹⁹ *"There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. ²²The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, ²³and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. ²⁴And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.' ²⁵But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. ²⁶And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.' ²⁷And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house— ²⁸for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' ²⁹But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' ³⁰And he said, 'No,*

father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’³¹ He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.’”

Luther

20. Poor Lazarus dies, with no one on earth to give him a decent burial; but the angels carry him into Abraham’s bosom. The rich man dies, too, and is buried, undoubtedly in a lordly manner, but in his case there are other kinds of angels waiting, to carry him to hell. Things are now reversed. Poor Lazarus, according to the Pharisees’ judgment, was accursed and damned, while the same critics deemed the rich man blessed of God and a saved man. Yet our text states that Lazarus comes into Abraham’s bosom; the rich man, however, enters into hell. We must, therefore, judge matters here rightly, not like the Pharisees, but as it is written.

21. We must make the proper distinction: the poor man doesn’t come into heaven because he is poor, nor the rich man into hell because he is rich; rather it was a case that the poor man accommodated himself well to the fact that he was poor, while the rich man failed to handle his riches properly. A distinction easily made, but not easily kept! Our “old Adam” remains an evil rascal. Once he knows that wealth in itself is not bad and poverty not good and that everything revolves around how a man handles them, he straightaway turns the distinction into a cover-up.

22. The distinction in and of itself is right and good: poverty is not by nature something good or wealth, evil. The person who handles his poverty properly and with patience, content that it is in God’s will, as St. Paul says (Phil. 4:11): “I have learned, in whatever state I am, therewith to be content,” his poverty is a precious thing and a preparation for eternal life. By the same token, when a wealthy person perceives how God has blessed him with possessions and resolves that, because God has bestowed riches upon him, he will rightly use his wealth and become neither proud nor greedy; he is ready to share his goods if and when a poor man comes to him for help in time of need. Such a rich man handles his riches well, like Abraham and David who were wealthy, or Job, of whom it is said that he did not eat his morsel by himself alone (Job 31).

23. This distinction, I say, is a right one. But how many people, do you think, keep it? For the “old Adam,” as said, is a rogue who reasons this way: I know the distinction very well, poverty saves no one, riches condemn nobody; therefore, even though I’m rich, I’m not condemned by such wealth. He goes merrily on, becomes secure and proud, thinking that he can do with his wealth as he pleases. Our old nature is a rascal and is very adept at this. Accordingly, each person has to be on guard against the kind of self-deception that happened to this “fat-cat.” God, the knower of hearts, will not be deceived, nothing is hidden from him.

24. Behold what a rogue and scoundrel the rich man is; he has no consideration for this poor man but despises and regards him as accursed as he lies at his gate and begs merely for the rinds and crumbs, and before allowing him to have the rinds and crumbs that fall from his table, he lets the dogs devour them or lets them go to waste. This example is not cited here for no purpose, but so that the rich should be on guard lest because of their riches greed creep into them furtively.

26. How many peasants, burghers, or nobles are there who give something to the poor Lazarus, who lies daily at their door? Yes, should they give to him? They rather skin him down to the bone, and what they extort they dissipate, squander, and show off with fancy food and clothing, guzzling drinks down their throats or hanging ornaments around the neck. For this reason I have often said, such conditions cannot continue much longer, but must come an end. Either the Turk or Brother Vitus will come and all of a sudden confiscate everything it took so long a time to extort, steal, rob, and amass. Or judgment Day will come rushing in and bring the game a halt. For God is no longer able to tolerate the greed, wantonness, pride, sensuality, and stealing. He must step in and take control himself since nothing else will stop it....

27. There poor Lazarus now lies before the rich man's gate, and no one attends him. But the beloved holy angels are sitting by and taking care of him because the rich man does not want to. Were I to change places, I would rather be poor Lazarus than the rich man, regardless of the fact that Lazarus lies before the gate of the rich man covered with sores, hungry, languishing, lonely, and without an attendant, while, on the other hand, the rich man has everything in abundance.

(*Sermons of Martin Luther: The House Postils*, Vol. 2. Ed.: Eugene Klug. Baker, 1996. pp. 223-240.)

One of the regular readers of these notes posed the question of whether this is a parable or not. He suggests that we read it very differently if we suppose that this is a true story and these are historical events. What do you think?

We thought that the account did not at some points sound realistic – they sounded more like literary devices than historical record – the daily feasting, the extreme poverty of Lazarus. The picture of Hades and Heaven being in visual distance from one another, also appeared to us that this was not a factual account. While it would augment the torment of the folks in Hades if they could see heavenly bliss, how is it that Abraham can see Lazarus? Would that not compromise his heavenly bliss? We also wondered if Hell/Hades is a complete separation from God how they could be see his abode?

Audience makes a difference – this is addressed to the Pharisees.

What are the implications for reading this story as a parable?

- *This is not a celestial geography source or a source in the exact nature of torment or bliss.*
- *Parables will use conventions/ideas which were prevalent at the time of Jesus to make a point. These ideas are not necessarily accurate (for instance, the mustard seed is not actually the smallest of seeds.)*
- *We look for a singular point or issue around which the story revolves.*

What are those implications for reading it as a historical account?

- *Suffering in hell is very real.*
- *The imperative to help his neighbor is real and the rich man's failure to help his neighbor has real implications.*
- *This becomes a proof text for the nature of heaven and hell. Should it?*
- *Apparently people in Hades can talk to folks in Heaven and vice versa.*

Why would we read this as a parable?

I tend to read this as a parable. Jesus seems to be saying something very pointed about covetousness (see Luther's comments at the end of the postil – not included above.) I think that the reasons for reading it as historical may be pastorally sound, but the text runs into several theological problems when read that way, particularly in its descriptions of hades and heaven.

So why the preceding verses? First it establishes the permanence and immutability of God's Law. It just doesn't change from generation to generation. The sins of our fathers would still be sins today. God doesn't deal in new dispensations with new rules for succeeding generations, no matter what the ethicists might tell us.

But then he goes into a brutal topic: Divorce. There is no personal tragedy quite like it. The participants know they have a mess on their hands, and they are utterly trapped by it. They cannot extricate themselves. It often leaves you financially poor but also spiritually poor, crushed, and almost lifeless. You are sure that everyone is talking about you at church, so you don't go. You know that this is wrong, but you are powerless to fix it, and you slowly go through this relational train wreck with every court proceeding, with every document signed, with every parting out of a life which had grown together.

Then we get the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man. Why the words on divorce immediately before, reinforced with the comment that the Law doesn't change, no matter how many times we have bent it? I think that Jesus is again not really talking about money here, but money is a stand in, a metaphor for the treasure of the kingdom which is the forgiveness of sins, the love of God for sinners, the gracious act of God in Jesus.

Who is rich and poor in this parable? Does it not seem like helpless Lazarus, broken in body and finances, pitiable and outcast is by far richer than the Rich Man who seems to have his life all together, whose life is not a disaster? Is Lazarus far more like the poor divorced man who is sitting outside the fellowship of the church, expelled because he has not the spiritual capital to

attend? Are the rich men those who sit in judgment of him inside, with their wife and children beside them, lives all tidy and neat and yet terribly empty in that they have no room for the little, least and lost, especially this divorced fellow outside the church?

There was a rich man and a poor man. The rich man has no name. But the poor man is given a name in this parable, which makes it rather unique in the genre of parable telling. The poor man's name was Lazarus which means "God is my help." He needed that help because he sure wasn't getting any help from the rich man. This all hinges on the name that Lazarus has. He is unique among the parables of Jesus in that he actually gets a name. No other actor in a parable is so blessed.

There are a number of themes in this thing, it is a strange parable actually because it is hardly an earthly story. In fact some have said that it is not really a parable at all, but much more like an analogy or an allegory. What it clearly cannot be is a treatise on celestial geography or a description of the torments of hell or the blessings of heaven. These are all set within the cultural context of the audience to which Jesus spoke.

But the theme here is quite operative. Those who trust in the Lord know the end of the story. Those who trust in something else have a very different end. There is only one call toward that trust, it is to be found in Jesus' day among Moses and the Prophets. Today that word is proclaimed from Christian pulpits, television sets, street corners, large banners at football games and a host of other places; but the message is the same as it was when Jesus and John burst on the scene so long ago. Repent and believe for the Kingdom of God is at hand.

If this is a parable about trust, is the Rich Man's real problem that he trusts his money and thus has nothing to share with poor Lazarus? Is Lazarus forced to trust in God because that is all he has? His health plan seems to have involved dogs licking sores, for heaven's sake! What sort of an HMO does he belong to? He must have signed up for the wrong health exchange under Obamacare! Or perhaps Obamacare has finally been repealed when this parable is set.

The Rich man's brothers will either believe it or not, likewise many will either believe us or not. And for those who do, there is a great blessing, a wonderful end to the story. Resting in the bosom of Abraham, he is the picture of peace and serenity. The requests of the rich man cannot disturb him. His joy is complete.

In the verses immediately before this passage Jesus challenges the culture we live in. He says that you cannot serve both God and money, the time is upon us for a choice to be made. We will either serve the money and hate God or serve God and hate the money, be willing to let it go, refuse its tyranny over us and our lives.

This sermon empowers that love of God and that ability to let the money go, or if my inclusion of the words on divorce have merit, It is necessary to remember that no matter how you identify the problem, the solution involves God's love for broken people. There is not one without the other, they go hand in hand. If you try to preach the money piece and leave out the love piece, it doesn't work. Likewise the love without the sacrificial life is missing the point. The Christian who is not

moved by preachers to be in service with time and treasures and talents is not really getting the good sermon. He is feeding at the trough but not growing and blooming as God has created him to do. He is a fruitless vine and that is not a good thing to be in this kingdom.

God keeps his promises. There is not one beggar who dies forgotten by the world who is not precious to God. There is not one sinner, even the ones which are cast out of churches through the arrogance of the “righteous” within who is forgotten by God. We are the creatures of his hand and all who trust in him, all of them, every one of them, is on his mind. You can count on it.

The trick is preaching the blessing of this without it turning into a works thing or into some sort of a manipulation of God. Bless is the best word for this. It keeps the action in God’s court but it is surely a good thing to say to a sinner and describes a very good thing for us.

Sermon Idea: The Lord is My Help (That the hearer would confess and rejoice that he/she is utterly dependent upon God and God has provided all that is necessary to support this body and life.)

This is a stewardship sermon. The Christian may have messed up priorities, but the answer is not that we try real hard to change them, but that God enter this picture and completely re-orient our lives.

We are used to seeing this sort of thing regularly. When there is some terrible thing wrong with my body, I have to trust the doctor and the surgeon and the nurses when I enter that operating room. They will use sharp scalpels, needle and thread, drugs and the like to cut me open, remove the tumor, give me a chance to live. If I don’t trust them, I will never check into that hospital, but trusting them, I can let them put that mask over my face and drift off to sleep aware of what they will do, but trusting them.

We do the same thing with accountants, attorneys, even the guy who is driving the car in the oncoming lane has to be trusted or I will never get behind the wheel of my own car and meet him on some country road at a combined speed well over 100 miles an hour. We will pass just feet from each other. Do we even think about the trust involved in that?

God has entered our lives and laid claim to them by the blood of Jesus. He cares about every moment and every day. That does not mean that things will always go well for me, but it means that my life is always in God’s hands and that frees me from the final responsibility for how things turn out. That freedom in turn lets me view my money totally differently. I am able to be generous and kind, courageous as John describes us in the Epistle lesson. I can love the other, the poor man, with my money.

My faith trusts God. It is not without some risk. Sometimes he may lead me to poverty and suffering for my own sake his kingdom. But I know that finally he leads me to heaven and eternal joy. I can trust him. It is the only way that I can ever joyfully let go of anything. But with trust in him, I can be generous, even joyfully generous with all that he gives me.

Another Sermon Idea: The Dogs came Licked his Sores (That the hearer would reject self-righteousness, trusting that God alone has provide him/her with the qualifications for heaven and granted all who trust in Him eternal life.)

This sermon involves another reading of the parable of the unjust steward which is right before this parable. Therein we suggest that the unjust manager was in fact giving away the master's wealth, but was commended for doing so. We too are giving away God's riches when we forgive, and likewise are commended, earning a welcome to heavenly dwellings from the very people we are forgiving.

This sermon notices the words on divorce right before this and wonders if the difference between the rich man and Lazarus is not a monetary wealth, but a wealth in righteousness. Does the divorcee feel like old Lazarus, pining away outside the church, unwelcome, or at least feeling unwelcome. Are the wealthy in fact the folks who seem to have wealth, on the outside keeping things together, solid family, regular attenders, but cold and barren when you take a look inside their heart. The rich man had only a crust for Lazarus, but Lazarus, in his helplessness, had God in a way that the rich man, for all his blessings did not.

Clearly Jesus wants us to be "Lazarus-like" and not like the rich man. This sermon postulates that such a dependency, a poverty is not an expression of fiscal realities but spiritual realities. The one who is helpless before his condition, who does not count on his own wealth, that one has a great friend in God, who will lay him/her on the bosom of Abraham for eternal rest. The false wealth of the rich man here is not monetary wealth but the security which relies on church membership, status, and self, but has no word of grace for the neighbor because we have experienced no grace. We hoard our riches of good works, but have nothing really to spare.

Jesus preached that we should repent for the kingdom of God is near. I too am a preacher of God's kingdom and you are the audience. There is no second chance, there is no mulligan before the throne of God, no ghost of Christmas will come and rouse us from our spiritual scrooginess. God has sent me, this word and this promise. Believe it. Your only hope, your only confidence is in God.

The recent book "Unchristian" really highlighted this fact about Churches. Most of those outside our doors think of Christians as judgmental. Lutherans tend to think that our doctrine is better than everyone else's. We can spot a heresy at forty feet, and so when some poor sinner expresses their faith in a way which makes us uncomfortable, we jump on the expression as inadequate, but do we really care for the poor heart that said it? Do we wonder what they feel and experience? There is more than one way to consider oneself "rich" in this regard. Are we theologically rich? Are we deceiving ourselves if we do not love that heretical neighbor?