

The First Sunday after The Trinity I Jo. 4: 7- Lk. 16: 19-31

+In the Name of the Triune God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen+

John and Peter were born on the same day and grew up in the neighborhood a few doors apart. They went to the same school, church, and both developed a taste for baseball. It started with Little League, then high school, and worked its way up to playing for the same college and then on the pros. One of them was a catcher and the other a pitcher and they formed a great battery. Even as their lives advanced to job and family they held onto their love of the game. Aging didn’t seem to dim their affection. One evening while watching a favorite team John told Peter that he hoped there would be baseball in heaven, and they made a pact that whoever passed first would check it out and come back to visit their friend with all the news. As fate played out Peter was the first to go leaving John without his friend and wondering about the future. In less than a week Pete appears and tells John of life beyond the pearly gates. He says, “John, I have good news and I have bad news. Which would you like first?” “Well, I suppose the good news is the way to start.” Pete-“Then I am glad to tell you that there is indeed baseball in heaven. We get to play every day, the field is immaculate, the weather perfect, and get this, the umpires never miss a call. It is just magnificent.” John-“That sounds great. What could be bad?” Pete-“I checked the starting roster for tomorrow, and you’re scheduled to pitch!”

The Gospel for today has a bit of the quality of good news-bad news. It is a tough parable that demonstrates in real life terms the Epistle’s proclamation that to love God is to love our neighbor, not merely with good intentions, but with actions that embody what God has already given us. As one meme puts it, “Love isn’t love until it’s given away!” The good news is God has already loved us beyond the end; the bad news is we too often squander the gift.

I have wondered why we have this set of lections on this Sunday which initiates the season of Trinitytide. The second half of the Church year focuses on what Jesus taught and did and asks us to participate, just as the first half focuses on who Jesus is. It may be that today’s lessons are a bit of foreshadowing of what is to come. Foreshadowing is used all the time in theatre and cinema. I came in to find our TV playing a movie this week from the 1980’s—Back to the Future—starring Michael J. Fox and Christopher Lloyd. It is about a wacky scientist who builds a time machine out of a Delorean automobile, and it actually works. For the first time I watched the opening scene and realized the clues present everywhere. Dr. Brown’s dog is named Einstein after the wiz who helped explain how time operates; the house is filled with clocks, as if to have a fixation on time and how it works; there is even a quick glance under a table that shows a box of plutonium vials, which the viewer discovers later in the movie has been hijacked by Dr. Brown from terrorists and is used to fuel his time machine. Foreshadowing lets us in on what is happening and what is important. If we listen carefully to our texts today it will become clear that divine love and mercy are more potent than any asset we can amass, and that Jesus enfleshes these in his actions, healing, miracles, teaching, and as his people we are called to embody the same. This season, until we reach Advent, will explore what it means to be the people of Jesus. It will be a time to uncover and learn how our prayer life unfolds into our moral and communal life. We will learn that in saying ‘yes’ to Jesus we will find ourselves having to say ‘no’ to ways of being in this world that are often touted as signs of power and prestige. We will discover that God through his Son does not mimic our human condition, but seeks to transform it by changing us both inside in our souls

and outside in our behavior. Re-pray our Collect for this morning. It asks for this very transformation.

Today that journey starts with a puzzling and often misread story about Lazarus and the rich man. It might be well if we begin our considerations this morning by asking what Jesus **does not say** in his telling of the parable. First, it is not about heaven and hell. Lazarus goes to Abraham, not to God, and the rich man is in Hades, which is the abode of the dead where one is cut off from God and all that gives life. Second, while Luke has a vital concern for the poor and the outcast, which runs throughout his Gospel (see the Magnificat) this is not a glorification of being poor or a condemnation of having wealth. Lazarus is not described as good or holy person thus deserving a reward, but as an impoverished and suffering human being in need of compassion. The man wearing Egyptian cloth (purple) and wiping his hands on bread after eating (which got tossed out) is not judged for what he has or even for his enjoyment of it. He is a representative figure for the Pharisees who equated being blessed with being wealthy. That is not spoken here but is the background for the parable, and is the assumption Jesus is challenging because its opposite would mean that being poor is a sign of divine displeasure. But notice it is not that he is hostile or contemptuous that brings him into focus, but rather his total disregard of one to whom he could have shown simple love.

There is at least one other striking absence within our narrative. There are 3 individuals, but only 2 have names. Abraham, the OT figure, is very nearly the shadow side of the rich man. He was notorious for his hospitality to anyone within arms-reach of his abode, and Lazarus whose name derives from Eliezer, which means 'help of my God'. It is the third figure who remains nameless. We know only his habit of feasting, his lack of notice of Lazarus until he needs help and then he acts as if the poor man is his servant. What is it about not having a name that is significant? Perhaps it is that he is the figure of all humanity in its sin. Having a name means a person is wanted, valued, and has a place at the table. In Jewish tradition great care was taken in selecting a name because it became both a symbol and embodiment of a person's character and belonging. The rich man has no name. He appears to belong only to himself, and that is a contradiction to loving as Jesus loves. It is painfully striking that the great chasm which separates him from his brothers, and from Lazarus' help is the same chasm that kept him from seeing and reaching out to a broken neighbor. This story is meant to be a mirror to our existence and if we peer into it honestly we may have a chance to recalibrate what/who we love. The rich man's fault is he loved his wealth more than his neighbor.

I have asked myself what this parable means in my life now. Perhaps one way of getting at that is to ask where is the figure of Lazarus appearing at our doorsteps or around a corner of our lives? I think about the women at our nursing facility who in her 90's lived without any visitors and for whom holidays, and many days, must have felt vacant had it not been for loving staff. Maybe the soul looms next door to us appearing for all measures to be fine, but who due to Covid and downsizing is trying to find the support to stay afloat, and more importantly to maintain a sense of dignity and meaning. And it may be that Lazarus looks a lot like someone who I describe as "up and out". That is, their poverty is not material or physical but for whom all the success they have achieved has not filled a sense of meaning or the need to be loved. Lazarus may be that child, who is just different in how she looks, plays, learns, and interacts and is sitting outside our gate. I think what haunts us in this life more than our misdeeds are the deeds we never did, but could and should have.

SERMON – THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER THE TRINITY – 6 JUNE 2021

St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

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This parable is not easy, and there is no way to make it so, but it is powerful. If you doubt it or think that is mundane or insignificant, take a look at a man who earned two doctorates during his university career, one in theology and another in philosophy. He later went on to gain a third one in the field of medicine. He was considered one of the finest minds in Austria and a premier organist in Vienna and expert on Bach. His future in academia was assured and promised to be of enormous comfort and success. Instead of staying he left to go to Africa and live in the most meager of conditions devoid of common conveniences, among people whose lives and belief systems harkened back to the Dark Ages, and where there were no organs to play, depriving him of one of his great loves. His name was Albert Schweitzer, and his motivation for such action was instigated by reading and digesting this parable! He later said that it forced him to face the imbalances in economics, justice, and simple human dignity. He was a person committed to the Kingdom of God, and to live in light of that kingdom meant saying no to his comforts in order to say yes to God. In God's Kingdom the world shines with a different hue. As Schweitzer commented in regard to this parable, "We must struggle with others and ourselves, so that, distracted as we are by the external things so prominent in our time, we, and they may find the road to inwardness and remain on it. Amen+