

“October Surprise”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Season of Pentecost, Sunday, September 25, 2016
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Scriptures: Luke 16: 19-31 1 Timothy 6: 6-19

Luke 16:19-31

¹⁹There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores.

²²The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side.

²⁴He called out, “Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.”

²⁵But Abraham said, “Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. ²⁶Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.”

²⁷He said, “Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house— ²⁸for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.”

²⁹Abraham replied, “They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.”

³⁰He said, “No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.” ³¹He said to him, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.” ’

1 Timothy 6:6-19

⁶Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; ⁷for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; ⁸but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. ⁹But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.

¹¹But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. ¹²Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. ¹³In the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you ¹⁴to keep the commandment without spot or blame until the manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁵which he will bring about at the right time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords. ¹⁶It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.

¹⁷As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. ¹⁸They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, ¹⁹thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for

the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

Sermon

A few weeks ago Betty and I were in NYC for a family wedding and reunion.
One afternoon we were traveling uptown by subway
 when a family of a mother and her two young daughters got on the train.
The girls were around 7 and 10 years old.
The girls sat next to Betty while their mother and I stood side by side,
 holding on to the bar for balance as the subway sped along the tracks.
The 7 year old looked up and said to her mother, *"Do you want to hear a joke?"*
"Sure," she said.
The child asked, *"What is fsssshhh?"*
"I don't know."
"It's a fish with no T's!"
Her mother said, *"That is a good one!"*
Her 10 year old sister said, *"I don't get it."*

Here is something we can all get:

The times we reflect the love of God the most
 are the times we are the most generous.

The ways we manifest the love of God the most
 are the ways we are the most generous.

The practice of our spirituality of our love for God and our neighbor as our self
 provides venues for generosity that may last for generations.

We have before us this morning two blessed Scriptures that work in concert.

They both speak of a spirituality of generosity that will last for generations.

These lessons from Jesus of Nazareth and the Apostle Paul
 enhance and inform each other;
 they enlighten listeners and encourage the Church.

Read and examined side by side,
 we see Paul expounding on generosity,
 on the richness of a life lived in the Spirit of God,
as if he were offering a sermon on Jesus' Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus.

Paul's teaching on the richness of a life lived in the Spirit of God
 gives to the world the underlying exposition and overlying application
 of the theology that Jesus teaches in a few simple words and images,
 in a parabolic illustration that invites us in
 to examine our own spiritual formation
 and thus, our daily lives in the human
 context.

In 1 Timothy the Apostle Paul wrote to the Church, saying:
“...there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment.”

*“For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil,
and in their eagerness to be rich
some have wandered away from the faith
and pierced themselves with many pains.*

*“But as for you, [people] of God, shun all this;
pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness.*

*“As for those who in the present age are rich,
command them not to be haughty,
or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches,
but rather on God who richly provides us
with everything for our enjoyment.*

*“They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share,
thus storing up for themselves
the treasure of a good foundation for the future,
so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.”*

Observe that Paul points out that money, in and of itself, is neutral.
“For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.”

He figured out that love can lead us home to God,
while obsession for things and goods, the lack of a sense of enough,
and the desire for more, always more,
can lead us away from the ways of the Lord,
can take us down scary alleyways and empty
byways
where lurk all kinds of evil within and
without.

In contrast to the love of money, to empty pursuit of things and vainglory,
Paul invites us to
“pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance,
gentleness.”

This is good, sound advice.

Sometimes when Jesus wanted to offer counsel he painted a picture with words.

He told stories with subtle, barely hidden messages called parables.

Jesus’ parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus gives imagery to a generous life.

It feels like Jesus illustrated Paul’s counsel.

**The times we reflect the love of God the most
are the times we are the most generous.**

You see, Jesus tells a parable about two men
who are separated in life by the walls built by the rich man;
in death their fortunes are reversed
as the poor man named Lazarus goes to heaven
and the rich man goes to Hades.

They are separated by chasms as deep and wide
as the rich man's walls were high.
This is a parable about an unnamed man
who refused to be a neighbor in life.
When he died and found himself far from heaven's pearly gates,
he sought to find a way to warn his five brothers of their future fates.
They were just like him.
Did the brothers get the message? If so, what did they learn?
What message do they – and we -- need to receive?

In the film "One True Thing," Kate becomes ill with cancer.
Her husband, George, insists that their daughter, Ellen,
come home to take care of her.

Ellen, who barely tolerates her mother's Martha Stewartish enthusiasms
and "Hints from Helloise" approach to life,
protests that she has a demanding career...
Her father lays it on thick, asking Ellen,
*"You got a Harvard education, but where is your heart?"*¹¹

Where is your heart?

The essence of the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus
is not that the Rich Man is rich; it's not that he has many material things;
it's not that he is clothed in purple and feasts sumptuously everyday
and washes his hands with bread that he then throws to the
dogs,
all the while Lazarus begs and bleeds and dies at
his gate.

The essence of Jesus' message is not that he has gained wealth;
it is that he has lost his heart.

Jesus' theological parable and Paul's ecclesiological letter ask, "Where is your heart?"
The longest journey in the world isn't up to the top of Mt. Everest
or down into the depths of the Pacific Ocean.

The longest journey is the one foot that separates and connects
our heart with our head, our faith with our reason, our passion with persona.
Where are you and I on our journeys from head to heart and back again?

Jesus offers us some most disturbing words of warning:
If we do not listen to Moses and the prophets,
neither will we listen if someone were to come back from the dead.

Will we listen to Moses?

In Deuteronomy 15:7, Moses said:

"Do not be hard hearted or tightfisted toward your needy neighbor."

Will we listen to the prophets?

In Isaiah 58:6-7, the prophet proclaimed:

*"Is not this the fast I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,*

*and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,*

and not to hide yourself from your own kin?"

In Letters from Children to God, a child offered this prayer:
*"Dear Lord, Will my father get into heaven
if he continues to use his bowling words around the house?"*

Where are our heads and hearts?
As Jesus tells the parable, he emphasizes that Lazarus has a name.
The hungry in our midst have names,
 and their names may sound like Joseph and Mary,
 Calvin and Shamika, Muhammed and Olga and Alphonso.
We all hunger, in one way or another;
 we are all broken and in need of the gracious healing
 that comes from the helping, feeding hand of a friend who acts for
 God.

**The times we reflect the love of God the most
are the times we are the most generous.**

George Buttrick at the University of Vanderbilt listened to this same parable
 and observed that as important as it is to share food,
 the parable is about an even deeper and more pervasive attitude,
 an attitude of neighborliness toward others.

Buttrick said:
*"The story offers no support to the assumption
that the [Rich Man] would have fulfilled all duty
had he dressed Lazarus' sores and fed his hunger.*

True charity is more than flinging a coin to a beggar;

it is not spasmodic or superficial.

*Ameliorations such as food and medicine are necessary,
but there is a more fundamental neighborliness."
"Fundamental neighborliness," therefore, is the barometer of the soul,
an indication of the attitude of one's heart
that is prized in the sight of God."***[2]**

A neighbor is one whom God expects us to love.
We are connected by six degrees of separation.
When you meet a total stranger, chances are that
 you know someone who knows someone who knows someone
 who knows someone who knows someone who knows
 the stranger in your midst.
No matter how wide the chasms we dig or how high the walls we build,
 we are all connected to one another on this blue planet spinning in the sky,

bonded together by the saving, redeeming, transforming love of God.

**The times we reflect the love of God the most
are the times we are the most generous.**

Will Willimon tells a story.

“...When I was serving a little church in rural Georgia,
one of my members had a relative who died,
and Patsy and I went to the funeral as a show of support for the
family.

The funeral was in a little, hot, crowded off brand Baptist country church.

Well, I had never seen anything like it.

They wheeled the coffin in, the preacher began to preach.

He shouted, fumed, flayed his arms.

“It’s too late for Joe,” he screamed.

“He might have wanted to do this or that in life, but it’s too late for him now.

He’s dead. It’s all over for him.

He might have wanted to straighten his life out, but he can’t now. It’s over.”

What a comfort this must be to the family, I thought.

“But it ain’t too late for you. People drop dead everyday.

So why wait? Now is the time for decision.

Now is the time to make your life count for something.

Give your life to Jesus.”

Well it was the worst thing I ever heard.

I asked Patsy on the way home,

“Can you imagine a preacher doing that kind of thing to a grieving family?

I’ve never heard something so manipulative, cheap, and inappropriate.

I would never preach a sermon like that.”

She agreed. She agreed it was tacky and manipulative, calloused.

“Of course,” she added, *“The worst part of all is that what he said was true.”*

What is the legacy of the journey you take from head to heart and back again?

The God of Love and Light, who speaks to us through Moses and the Prophets,

through Jesus Christ and then Paul,

through the saints that have gone on before us

and those who touch our lives today,

call us to invest our life

in something bigger than our self

that will outlive you and me.

What is generosity?

Generosity in this world carries into the next

The results of generosity here don’t end at the grave

We reap blessings of generosity beyond this life

The times when we reflect the heart and nature of God

are the times when we are generous

with our time, resources, patience, love, encouragement...

Those times are when we are most like God.

Can you think of a character trait more important, more vital, more life-giving?

Be generous with the resources you have at hand.
What do you have to give?
You don't have to be rich to be generous – share of what you have.
Is there something that keeps you from being generous?
Usually some sort of fear.
Do other people think you are as generous as you really are?
Who motivates you to be generous?
How do you feel about those who are generous?

Jesus invites us to invest our life in something bigger than us
that will outlive you and me.

**The times we reflect the love of God the most
are the times we are the most generous.**

You know, in politics they talk about the October Surprise,
a sudden discovery or error or change upon which the November election
pivots.
Let the Church of Jesus Christ have our own October Surprise.

Choose to take the challenge to surprise someone every week in October.
Surprise someone with your generosity.
Surprise someone each week with your generosity of time, money, encouragement.
Generosity is discipleship.
Following Jesus in how we live.

Oscar Romero, the late Archbishop of San Salvador,
said that we are prophets of a future not our own.

Oscar Romero reminded us that:

It helps, now and then, to step back and take the long view. The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us. No statement says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession brings perfection. No pastoral visit brings wholeness. No program accomplishes the church's mission. No set of goals and objectives includes everything. This is what we are about: We plant seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces effects beyond our capabilities. We cannot do everything and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for God's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

[1] Daphne Merkin, The New Yorker, 9-28-98, P. 104.

[2] New Interpreter's Bible: Luke, Page 320.