

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 25, 2022
 “Denial or Discipleship?” (Luke 16:19-31)

In last week’s gospel, Jesus told a parable lifting up a bad man’s good example. We learned that our money is not ours, but rather a tool – a resource – God has given us in order that we might accomplish worthwhile things. Although the manager was dishonest in his dealings, he was commended for being shrewd. Jesus said we should be just a shrewd in those matters that concern our souls as we are in those matters that concern our business and financial endeavors. Instead of using our money for personal gain – for power, prestige and possessions – we should use it to benefit others: giving to the poor, helping those less fortunate, supporting our church through our offerings. This is good stewardship of the gifts God has given us. And when we practice good stewardship, Jesus says, our generosity will store for us treasures in heaven. Jesus went on to say that we cannot serve God and wealth. If we are not faithful in dealing with the wealth of this world, how can we be entrusted with the true treasures of heaven?

With this thought of heavenly treasures planted in our minds, let us turn to the story of the rich man and Lazarus. With your permission, I’d like to put it in a more contemporary setting. Once upon a time there was a billionaire who wore only the finest clothes. He had fine silk suits and tailored shirts. His shoes were made in Italy and his handkerchiefs were embroidered with real gold. And this man ate only the finest foods: filet mignon, lobster, caviar and Champaign. He lived like this every day, even Sundays.

At the gate of the rich man’s estate was a homeless man named Lazarus. (By the way, Lazarus means “God is my help.”) Lazarus was in the advanced stages of Tuberculosis and was starving. He was happy when he found something to eat in the rich man’s garbage. On cold nights the street dogs would curl up with him, and he didn’t even have the strength to shoo them away. Finally, the tuberculosis and malnutrition took their toll. Lazarus died and was carried away by the angels to heaven.

The rich man also died and found himself in hell. From the torments of hell he could look up and see Lazarus and Abraham feasting on steak, lobster and caviar. And everywhere there were tall glasses of cold, clear water. In anguish in the fires of hell he called out, *Father Abraham, please send Lazarus to give me just a drop of water to cool my tongue.*

But Abraham replied, *You received good things during your life, now it is Lazarus’ turn to experience the good life. Anyway, he can’t come there. There is a great divide between us and you and no one can cross it.*

Then the rich man begged, *Father Abraham, please send Lazarus to my father’s house, for I have five brothers. Perhaps if he appeared to them, he could warn them to change their ways so they don’t end up in torment like me.*

But Abraham replied, *They have the Bible to tell them how to live and preachers to teach them about salvation. Let your brothers listen to them.*

The rich man continued, *But if someone should rise from the dead, that might convince them!*

And Abraham replied, *If they won't listen to the Bible and the preachers, what makes you think that a resurrection will change their minds?*

Now the people in Jesus' audience would have been shocked by this parable. It was common belief that if one were prosperous – having wealth, position etc. –that person was favored by God; and God's favored would end up in heaven. On the other hand, someone who was living a miserable life – one characterized by sickness and poverty – was thought to have done something to warrant God's punishment. And that punishment would continue in the next life. But here again, as he so often does, Jesus turns things upside down and reverses their expectations. The poor will be rich and the rich will be poor. The last will be first and the first will be last.

Now we need to note that the rich man's undoing was not brought about because of his wealth. His undoing was that because he was so self-absorbed, he missed the real point of life – living for God and other people.

As Jesus tells the parable, he never says that the rich man was unkind to Lazarus. He didn't abuse him verbally or physically. He didn't have him removed from his gate. He just approached him with indifference. These two were practically neighbors. The rich man, no doubt, passed by Lazarus every day. Yet, he offered him nothing – not even the time of day.

It's like a stray cat or dog coming to your house. Now you don't want a pet, don't want the responsibility of caring for it; but after a day or two, it appears he has taken up residence. Now you don't harm the animal, but you want him to go away, so you don't contribute to its well-being. Even though you can see its rib cage, you offer it no food. Nor do you pet it or show any kind of affection; for if you do, it might stay permanently. So you enter into a denial of sorts. By pretending it is not there, you bear no responsibility for it. You can remain indifferent to it and focus your attention on more important matters.

The rich man in the parable paid no attention to Lazarus. He denied that he even existed so that he could focus on his own flamboyant lifestyle. He also denied the existence of God's Word which teaches that riches and possessions – although they afford one with many opportunities – have risks and dangers associated with them. If approached with the wrong attitude, riches can keep you out of heaven.

Truth is, never before in history have people had so many *things*. And the major problem with all these things is that people associate the accumulation of worldly treasures with happiness and fulfillment. We think that the more we have, the more we can do, and the happier and more fulfilled we will be. But this is a spiritual pitfall that gets so many in trouble. It was a much a problem 2000 years ago when Paul wrote to the young pastor, Timothy, as it is today.

In second lesson for today, Paul outlines the proper relationship between fulfillment and possessions. Paul doesn't teach us that money itself is evil, but that the *love* of money and possessions can lead to trouble. So he warns us that instead of seeking riches, we are to seek things like righteousness, godliness, faithfulness, love, endurance, gentleness God doesn't want us to set our hopes on the uncertainty of our riches – because they can just as easily be taken

away – but to focus on God and being generous with our resources so that the needs of others may be met.

Paul says that we bring nothing into this world and we take nothing out of it. Therefore, the *things* of this world are unimportant. What is important, as God's Word teaches us, is that God so loved us that he gave his only Son in order that we might have eternal life. We, then, are called to love him back with our hearts, souls, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. That's the secret to a contented and fulfilled life. That's what God wants for us. And, deep down, that's what we want for ourselves.

But one of the things standing in our way, one of the main things that keeps us from attaining this joy and contentment in life, is our possessions. At another time Jesus said it was harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. This is because those who have lots of possessions find it hard to accept the basic premise of faith – that Jesus is Lord and Savior. Those who cannot accept this premise try to find their salvation in other things.

Now this parable doesn't say that all poor people will go to heaven and all rich people to hell. We know, don't we, that our salvation is dependent on God's grace, received in faith. Salvation is ours when we trust Christ to have lordship in our lives. Remember what Lazarus' name means? God is my help. Lazarus went to heaven because he bowed before the God who helps us. The rich man went to hell because he denied God the honor of having lordship over his life.

This rich man may have been respected in town. He may have gone to the synagogue regularly and even given to some local charities. He probably thought that he would be even more greatly rewarded in heaven. But he didn't pay attention to God and was indifferent to Lazarus, the needy man right outside his door. He denied that he had any responsibility to use his God-given resources to help a hurting neighbor.

My friends, God calls us to discipleship, not denial. God calls us to follow the example of Jesus, who was rich beyond earthly standards, yet gave up the glories of heaven to follow his heavenly Father's will in saving you and me.

It comes down to one question: denial or discipleship? For what do you and I live? Why do we get up in the morning? Do we get up and go to work so we can earn even more money to accumulate even more things? Or do we get out of bed in order to do those things which demonstrate our love for God and neighbor? Do we value the people we meet or the assets we acquire? Do we use our God-given resources for our own advancement or do we use them in pursuit of worthwhile things that will make a difference in the lives of others?

To have the joyful, contented, and fulfilled life God desires for each of us comes down to this one question: Will we live our lives in denial or in faithful discipleship? Amen.