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Trinity 1  
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Luke 16:19-31  
Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Muncie, Ind.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

*There was a rich man... And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus.*

Looks can be deceiving. After all, who appears to be the blessed man in today's parable? Is it Lazarus, the beggar full of sores who lies as an outcast attended to only by the dogs who came to lick his open sores? We hardly see Lazarus as the model of the good life. He might be the object of our pity and even of our charity. But would you really consider him to be a man blessed by God? In fact, wouldn't you conclude the very opposite?

Then there's the rich man. He seems to embody the good life. He's well dressed in his expensive purples and fine linens. Every meal for him is a feast. It seems that he lives without a worry in the world. He's secure and confident in himself. From all appearances it seems that he's a man blessed by God.

But looks can be deceiving. What counts is what God sees. What counts is how these men stand before God, before the face of God who searches the hearts and minds of all. Before Him nothing can be concealed. So death strips both Lazarus and the rich man of the outward wrappings that had covered their lives in this world.

For Lazarus death was a relief. He was relieved of the misery of his pain and suffering and was escorted by the angels to heaven. The former things of sickness and shame, of hunger and deprivation were no more. The sores were gone. Lazarus who had hungered is now satisfied. No more need to gather up crumbs from the rich man's table, because now he is given to feast from the bounty of Messiah's Table, a place at salvation's banquet with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

What man exalts, God sees as an abomination; what man raises up, God sees as lowly. What man despises, God sees as blessed. Jesus speaks the Beatitude:

*"Blessed are you that hunger now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh...but woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you that are full now, for you shall hunger" (Lk 6:21, 24-25).*

Therefore we now behold Lazarus as he really is (and actually was, even while begging at the gate): clothed with the righteousness of His Savior. Lazarus's life wasn't in vain. It

wasn't wasted by poverty and disease. His poor life was redeemed. He now shines with a glory not his own, for he now stands in the presence of His God and Savior.

Even as death removes the covering of shame and suffering from the life of Lazarus, so also death peels back the thin veneer of prestige and fortune that the rich man had used to hide his spiritual corruption. Jesus says, *"The rich man also died and was buried."* A fancy funeral complete with eulogies that praised the rich man's many accomplishments and recounted his civic virtues can't change the fact that this man died without faith in the one true God. *"It is appointed man once to die and then face judgment,"* says the Book of Hebrews. This man who had lived without God, trusting instead in a god of his own making, now faces an eternity without God. This is hell.

Hell, of course, isn't a popular topic. Even though our Lord mentions hell more often than He mentions heaven, many preachers today prefer never to talk of hell. Unbelievers mock Christians for believing in hell. Unbelievers say that they would never want to be with a God who created hell. Yet human creatures who insist on living without Christ Jesus will get the desire of their hearts. God will let them have their own way for all eternity. That's hell. The rich man now experiences the torment and agony of such separation.

C.S. Lewis says that the overriding attitude of those in hell is unending regret. They must for all eternity see God but have no access to Him. They must behold what could have been and now can never be. So our Lord pictures the rich man looking over that great divide, that unbridgeable chasm between hell and heaven. Even in hell the rich man would use Lazarus for his own purposes. He cries out to Abraham, making his first request, *"Send Lazarus over here with a drop of water to cool my tongue."* But Lazarus can't come. He's in paradise, forever separated from all that would cause him pain.

Lazarus is in Heaven. What made Lazarus's destiny different from the rich man wasn't that he was poor, but that he was poor in spirit. Jesus says, *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."* To be poor in spirit means to be humble and penitent before God, to trust not in yourself but in Him alone, to rely not on your own goodness but on His goodness. It means to look to the Lord for all that you need and to run to Him for help and comfort. The Scriptures say this: *"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart—these, O God, You will not despise."*

You'll notice that of the two main characters in this parable, only one has a name. The bound-for-hell man has no name. For the Good Shepherd doesn't name hell-bound goats. The rich man has no name because God will not remember the nameless in hell, *"Depart from Me, I never knew you."* But the Good Shepherd knows His sheep and calls them each by name. Only the heaven-bound sheep are given names. God has given you a name in Holy Baptism. He gave you His own name by water and the Spirit, claiming you for His own. He knows you by name. You are not nameless. You bear the saving name of the Holy Trinity.

The name "Lazarus" is one of the keys to understanding this account, understanding the real difference between the rich man and the poor man. "Lazarus" means: "The one whom God helps" or "God is my helper." He was sick, hungry, and covered with sores; the dogs licked his wounds. But he still trusted in God. He was a true son of Abraham, who *"believed in the Lord, and [God] accounted it to him for righteousness."* He still was able to say in faith what his name meant, "God is my helper."

The rich man makes a second request. He implores Abraham to let Lazarus go back to earth to warn the rich man's five brothers to repent before it is too late. Again, request denied. Listen to Abraham's answer: *"They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them."* In other words, they have the Scriptures that are read and preached each Sabbath in the synagogue. They already have the words of life. Let them heed the Scriptures and so believe in the promises of God.

But the rich man argues that the Scriptures aren't enough. He reasons that if someone would return from the grave, then his hardened brothers would be convinced and believe. Such a phantom from beyond the door of death might shock the brothers and even arouse their curiosity and increase in them speculation about spiritual things, but the return of Lazarus wouldn't create faith in the living God. Abraham rightly answers, *"If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead."* Of course these words are prophetic, because the One who tells this parable is the Lord who was crucified for the sins of the world and on the third day rose from the dead. Yet His resurrection from the grave will convince no one who refuses to believe Moses and the prophets, that is, the Scriptures.

That's why, after He was raised from the dead, our Lord took His disciples back to the Scriptures. As He walked with two disciples on the Emmaus Road on Easter evening, Jesus

opened the Scriptures to them, showing them Moses and the prophets and how it was necessary that the Messiah suffer the death on the cross and the third day be raised again.

Moses and the Prophets all point to Jesus. The beggar Lazarus went to heaven because he believed Moses and the prophets. That is, he believed in the Messiah whom they spoke of, who would take the sins of the world upon Himself and earn for him God's favor and a place in heaven.

Jesus Christ, the Messiah, has done the same for you. As Isaiah prophesied, "Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows...He was pierced for our transgressions... and by his wounds, we are healed." You see, in order to rescue us, Jesus made Himself like Lazarus. He put Himself at the mercy of the rich and powerful so that He might take away the judgment of God from us on the cross. In Psalm 22 Jesus says, "*Dogs have surrounded me; a band of evil men has encircled me, they have pierced my hands and my feet.*" These dogs licked the sores of Jesus' scourging, that is, they mocked His suffering. But the blood that flowed from His holy wounds bought our forgiveness and cleansed us from our sin. That is why it is written, "*You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, who though He was rich, yet for your sakes became poor, so that you, through His poverty, might become rich.*"

Looks can be deceiving. But now, with clear eyes, behold who is the truly rich man in this account. Is it not Lazarus? For the rich man laid up treasures for himself on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal. But Lazarus laid up for himself treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy and where thieves do not break in and steal—everlasting treasures. Lazarus didn't desire to be clothed in purple. Rather, it says that he desired to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table.

And what do those crumbs signify? Consider what sits on the Holy Altar of the church: crumbs and morsels, a small and unimpressive Sacrament. But faith knows how great and rich this Sacrament is. For in these crumbs are buried the riches of Christ's life and salvation! Those who are self-sustained in this life are always casting off these crumbs in favor of something more immediately gratifying. The empty spots in our pews testify to this unfortunate truth. But the faithful continually beg for the holy crumbs, as we say before the Supper, "*O Christ, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, have mercy on us.*" In the end a great, uncrossable gulf will be fixed between the one side, where the beggars

dwell forever in the comfort of God's presence in Abraham's bosom, and the other side, where the self-sufficient dwell forever in unquenchable fire.

Let the gulf be fixed today, then, between the riches and pleasures that are seen, which allure and entice and deceive our senses, and the heavenly riches which are hidden, grasped only by faith. Let the trust of your heart ever dwell on the heavenly side, even in the midst of afflictions and troubles. Do not despise bodily suffering, or any of the suffering you may receive on account of Christ, but receive it as a gift of God which turns our hearts away from what is perishable to what is imperishable. Take your place with Lazarus. For in so doing you are taking your place with Christ, who suffered anguish of soul for you that your soul may be received into the peace and solace of heaven at death, and who suffered in the flesh for you that you may be raised in the flesh with Him on the Last Day. And we can ever say with Lazarus, "God is my Helper. I will sing to the Lord, because He has dealt bountifully with me."

In Jesus' Name.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in + Christ Jesus.