

*19“There 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.’”*

It was Easter morning in 1976 – the community Easter Sunrise service at the Church of God in Goodrich, North Dakota. The preacher was Milford Ortman – longtime pastor of the Church of God congregation. The text he had picked for the proclamation of Jesus’ resurrection was the gospel reading we have before us today. This is what he preached: Hell is real. A place of endless torment. Jesus in this lesson tells us how those in hell can look and see the comfort of those in heaven – but that no one can pass from heaven to hell or from hell to heaven because Jesus tells us there is a great chasm between the two. Pastor Ortman told us that this was not just a story Jesus was telling but an actual happening being reported by the Son of God to warn us all not to live sinful lives. But Pastor Ortman never said a word about the rich sharing with the poor. Not a word.

On this morning in September, 28 years later, this pastor is not going to spend any time at all discussing the details of heaven and hell – for I do not think that is what Jesus is intending to teach through this story. But I know that all of you would think my sermon a lot more interesting if I did. For when we can set our minds on the peripheral issues – what heaven will be like, or whether the torment in hell is really endless or whether the signs of the times are indicating the end is near or whether acolytes should wear tennis shoes - when we can keep our minds on the peripheral issues then we won’t have to think about the really tough issues Jesus raises. What does God think about a world where rich people feast and poor people starve? Or better yet what does God think about me

putting money aside for my retirement while somewhere in this world children die for lack of food or medicine? With this story Jesus tells me the answer to that question.

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

Let’s pretend they were real people for a moment. What might the rich man have been saying to himself? I really should help Lazarus but if I do they will not be bringing only him down to my doorstep but every poor person in town. I have no choice but to protect myself.

How do I know how he thinks? Because that is how I think. Maybe you think that way too.

Well, the next part of the story tells how God thinks. Angels came for Lazarus when he died to carry him to the place of highest honor – reclining at table right next to Father Abraham. No angels came for the rich man – he died and was buried. In Hades where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away and Lazarus at this side. Yes, this story tells us what God thinks – how dear to God are those who suffer greatly in life – how precious – and how angry God is with us who have every blessing in this life but do not share.

We Lutherans talk about grace – forgiveness, the mercy of God. Sometimes we may think and act as if we can continue in our selfishness – our mean-spiritedness toward the poor or people of other races or ethnic groups – as if not loving some neighbors is our God given right. I am forgiven – after all – surely God would never hold something against me. But it was Jesus who told this story.

The rich man, being in torment, says, “Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in the water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.”

“Child, remember that in 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. 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.”

“Then send him to my father’s house I have five brothers” – let Lazarus warn them.

And Abraham replied, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets they will not believe even if someone should rise from the dead.”

For each of us who are not poor this is a sad story. There is no hope for this rich man. Does this mean there is no hope for you and for me when we choose our own comfort and enjoyment over our neighbor’s needs? From my perspective it makes perfect sense to spend money on my protection and money to ensure the safety and comforts of my descendents. But how much spending on protecting my lifestyle and how much spending on Aids orphans makes sense to God? Father Abraham still called the rich man, “child” even as they were forever separated. Would God dare to do to me what I do to others even though I am God’s child?

Jesus told this story to the Pharisees whom Luke tells us were lovers of money. Insofar as I am a lover of money and you are a lover of money he is telling this story to us. What did he hope for from the Pharisees? A change of heart – a change of commitments – opening their hearts and homes to the poor. And from you and me? I think that we would understand that Jesus’ teaching is not just talk but it is intended to transform us from petty people concerned only for ourselves and our own into a people who share the love that is in Jesus’ heart for all.

Open your heart, open your checkbook to share. The great chasm will be bridged.

A final thought. One has risen from the dead, Jesus. And he has taught that in the least of his brothers and sisters we will encounter him today, living among us. In feeding when he is hungry, and clothing when he is naked, and visiting when he is sick, we bridge the chasm now.

