

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Year C

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Amos 6:1a, 4-7

Psalm 146

I Timothy 6:6-19

Luke 16:19-31

09/25/2022

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Luke:

[Jesus said:] 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.’”

The Gospel of Our Lord

Prayer

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

Amen.

Misunderstanding

Good morning! If you had to name the greatest artist of all time, who would you pick? Picasso? Da Vinci? Monet? A name that probably makes the top 5 for almost everyone has got to be the one and only Michelangelo. The Renaissance artist is famous for his work on the Sistine Chapel, but sculpture was by far his favorite medium. From stone he gave us the Madonna and Child, the world famous David, and a personal favorite of mine, the Pieta. But did you know he did a statue of Moses? In the early 1500’s Pope Julius II commissioned Michelangelo to design his tomb, so the man got to work. The figure of Moses sits in the middle of the piece, which can be found in Rome at the church of San Pietro in Vincoli. The statue stands almost roughly 8 feet tall, but it’s not the height that will distract you. No, when you gaze upon the beautiful and intricate work rendered in marble you will notice two interesting details on the top of Moses’ head... a pair of horns.

You might think this was some passive aggressive attack on the papacy, but it’s actually just an honest mistake, a misunderstanding. It all boils down to a mis-translation from the Hebrew to the Latin Vulgate, the

Bible translation of the day. Towards the end of Exodus chapter 34 Moses is described as having a face that was shining because of the time he spent with God on Mount Sinai. The problem is that Hebrew is a tricky language. It's written from right to left and from the back to the front. It's also a language without any vowels. Instead dots and dashes above letters are used to signify what sound, or vowels as we would understand it, to use. But the word for shining has a striking similarity to the word for horns, and if someone mis-read the dots and dashes, we just might end up with a Latin Bible translation that described good ol' Moses as having a set of horns.

As I have shared before, my experience with Hebrew and Greek make it evident that I'm not sure I would do any better, but man, that's a misunderstanding. Our text today has at its core a misunderstanding too, but not one so forgivable.

The parable in our Gospel lesson tells the tale of a rich man and Lazarus. One goes to heaven, and the other suffers in Hades. On the surface it can seem like a simple story about the dangers of lavish living. Heck, boiled down it seems to suggest that anyone who is rich will go to hell, while all the poor go to heaven. But this is Jesus we're talking about, and like all good story tellers, he's being sneaky. In the first century (and even now if we're honest) it was a popular belief that the rich had been blessed by God and the poor had obviously done something that deserved their punishment. Judaism was no different. *"Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field. Blessed shall be the fruit of your body, and the fruit of your group, and the fruit of your beasts, the increase of your cattle, and the young of your flock"* reads Deuteronomy 28:3-4. We see a similar mindset in the book of Job where after suffering so much pain Job's friends ask how he was obviously disobeying God to deserve such

punishment. So, looking at our text then, *“the rich man cannot be an exaggeration of godless materialism but a realistic portrait of a man whose wealth was taken as evidence of God’s favor...”*¹ But Jesus is challenging this interpretation.

Before we can go there, let’s take a look at some of the details. First we notice that the rich man is dressed in purple and fine linen. Purple was a notoriously challenging and costly color to dye, and the quality of the linen is highlighted. This tells us that this is a REALLY wealthy man. How wealthy you ask? The rich man can afford to feast every single day. Next we are introduced to Lazarus, whose name means *“My God helps.”*² One interesting detail is that this is the only parable in all of scripture where Jesus uses proper names, both Lazarus and Abraham.³ But back to our beggar. It was customary to install a bench near the gates of wealthy homes so that the poor could sit and wait for scraps from the feasts. In fact, one scholar points out that you can still see examples of these in the ruins of Pompeii.⁴ This is where Lazarus spends his time.

He’s not only poor, but afflicted with sores. He is so sad and dismal that he doesn’t care when dogs come to lick his sores. While you and I might not enjoy it when our dogs try and lick us, we miss that this would have been a cultural no-no for Lazarus. The dogs were ritually unclean, and so Lazarus would have been too. The text tells us that both die, but that the rich man is buried. In our Monday text study we were a little confused about this detail, but it seems that Jesus is pointing to another sign of the

¹ Craddock, Fred B. *Luke*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. p. 196.

² Johnson, Luke T., and Daniel J. Harrington. *The Gospel of Luke*. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1991. p. 252.

³ Craddock, Fred B. *Luke*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. p. 194.

⁴<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-26-3/commentary-on-luke-1619-31-8>

rich man's wealth. When Lazarus dies, his body was probably thrown near the city dump. The rich man on the other hand is wealthy enough to afford a proper funeral and burial.⁵

Now, remember that this is a parable, and not a systematic theology that Jesus is talking about. So while it's tempting to speculate about the cosmology based on the whole Hades, Heaven, and gulf that is between, remember that Jesus is trying to make a point by using a story. Jesus is trying to draw a stark comparison between the fates of both men. He does this because there is a little detail that our assigned text leaves out. Jesus is in the midst of an argument with some Pharisees. The important thing to remember is that these are faithful Jews who honestly believed they were following the rule that God had given them. They think like the rich man, that any wealth they accumulate must be a blessing from God. Jesus lifts up a different interpretation, one that was also rooted in the Law.

So, this isn't a story about the dangers of wealth. That's certainly a point that the text makes, but at its core this is a theological debate on the correct understanding of God's mission for all of us. Now... here's the challenging part. It can be easy for us to dismiss the Pharisees, they can often seem like the bad guys. But Jesus is essentially talking to you and me, the people who attend worship faithfully. The convicting question for us is this: what application of scripture have we too misused? Is it possible that we have missed the forest for the trees because we have been blindly following one misunderstanding? All the while God has been shouting at us to see things differently? It's certainly a question that deserves to be considered. And if you're like me and were immediately consumed with anxiety over what you've misunderstood, take a deep breath. We're not

⁵ Craddock, Fred B. *Luke*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. p. 195.

alone. We have each other. We have the Holy Spirit guiding us, and we have the whole experience of Moses and the Prophets that can help us see our mistakes. It's never too late to make the change. Amen.