

Pentecost 19– September 25, 2016
Text: Luke 16:19-31
Theme: "There's No Coming Back"

I like this parable recorded in Luke's Gospel because it gives us a little bit of information about something we all want to know. What happens to you when you die? So let me warn you in advance, if you are attached to the idea that your deceased loved ones interact with you, help you, pray for you, and look down on you from heaven, just put in your headphones and read a psalm or two during the sermon.

Jesus makes several things very clear to us in his parable of the rich man and Lazarus. First, there is no purgatory. When you die, you immediately enter your eternal situation; heaven or hell and it cannot be reversed. There is no coming back from Heaven or Hell. So that is both a comfort and a warning for us. It is a comfort in knowing that our loved one who died in faith is not floating around in some kind of nebulous netherworld awaiting entrance into paradise after we have said enough prayers and paid enough money for masses to be said. It is a warning in that we know that there are no second chances post death, so if you know someone who rejects Christ, you better tell him about Christ so that the Holy Spirit has an opportunity to create faith before he dies.

Second, no one comes back from the dead. Once you are dead, you are dead and there is no coming back until the day of the resurrection when you will be reunited with your body for eternity. There are no ghosts. If you see your long dead uncle Hal sitting in the living room it is

one of two things. One, you may need to see an ophthalmologist, a neurologist or a psychiatrist because you might have something wrong with your eyes or your brain either physically or chemically. This is a well-known cause for hallucinations. The other option is that you seeing an evil angel taking the form of someone you trusted on earth in order to mislead you. In that case, do not listen to Uncle Hal, open your Bible and start reading aloud. If he doesn't vanish, call me.

No one who dies ever, ever, ever comes back to earth until the day of the resurrection. There are no ghosts or spirits of departed loved ones floating around in your attic and if there is a supernatural presence trying to tell you things, it is an evil angel trying to lead you astray because he knows you would never believe him if he looked like what he is, a demon straight from Hell. When we die, we immediately exit this world and begin our afterlife. If we died with faith in Christ, our afterlife is wonderful. Jesus calls it paradise when he tells the thief on the cross, "Today you will be with me in paradise." Revelation speaks of it as a place of joy where all tears are wiped away. But we do not know what it is like to be a disembodied soul. We don't know how time passes or if we are even aware of time. We don't know what we will be doing. Those are all things to let God handle because obviously, he does not think we need to know.

What we do need to know, as described in this parable, is that because there is no coming back from death, our lives on this earth matter. The choices we make matter, not because our salvation is dependent upon

our works but because Satan has a plan to deceive us and lead us away from God and away from his Word and Sacraments that strengthen our faith. The rich man in the parable was not portrayed as bad or evil. He was portrayed as a fat, happy, 21st century American who had made all the right worldly choices. He didn't give his money away to the poor beggars at the gate, let them eat scraps, and for comfort, the dogs can lick their sores. It's their own fault that they are poor. They didn't get educated. They didn't work hard enough. They made poor choices in life. Let them pull themselves up by their. It's up to them.

In an election year there is always much talk about feeding the poor, healing the sick and housing the homeless. I can never tell how much is an honest desire to help the poor and needy and how much is rhetoric to make voters feel better that someone – someone ELSE - will take care of those poor and needy so I don't have to. But who should care of them? Is it not our calling as God's children, to help all people all the time? And are we not called to help with more than kind words and a pat on the head. God clearly calls us to go to the beggars at our gates and feed them and clothe them and care for them. Maybe some of those beggars are financially destitute, and maybe some of them are as rich as Midas. See that is the twist in this parable. As it turns out, the poor beggar was not Lazarus, starving in the dirt with dogs licking his sores. The poor beggar was the rich man. The poor beggar could not see beyond his earthly

accomplishments and ended up in Hell. He had a few years of pleasure and fun, followed by an eternity of misery in a lake of fire.

It is difficult to set aside our pride and our lust for more of everything and instead focus our money and time on proclaiming the Gospel. It is hard to write checks for faithful offerings to the Church and then turn around and give more for Missionaries, Seminaries and Mercy ministry. It is hard to choose to be Lazarus, especially when being the rich man is a viable option. It is too hard.

So God sent me, an overseer, as St. Paul calls me in his Epistle to Timothy, but we use the term Pastor. I joke with the church council telling them that their job is to find the money, my job is to spend it. But more importantly, my job is to serve you the Word of God to strengthen your faith, to Baptize you with the Holy waters of Baptism to wash away all your sin and to feed you the very body and blood of Christ to empower you to live for Christ. As Christ dwells in us more and more powerfully, we slowly become Lazarus. We care less and less for the things of this world and seek the things of God instead. We truly care for the poor, both the poor in things and more importantly, the poor in spirit. We truly care about proclaiming the Gospel here and throughout the world. We truly care about what God calls us to care about while we are still here on this earth and there is still opportunity for all the rich men to become Lazarus.