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THE RICH MAN AND LAZARUS (NRSV)

LUKE 16:19–31 ¹⁹There 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.'"

In August 2006, I found myself in New Orleans during orientation w/e at Tulane University, preparing myself to entrust my son, Patrick, into the care of total strangers 1,288.68 miles away from home. Although "Mr. Independent", as I call him now, was feeling very ready to begin *his* new life, the staff had prepared a comprehensive series of classes for the thousands of parents of freshmen. I was impressed by their awareness of what we parents needed to hear before we left our children in their care. There were parent classes on student nutrition, student safety, which also covered hurricane evacuation procedures, of course. There were parent classes on campus medical care, a review of the tutoring program for those facing academic challenges, the availability of career counselors, on and on until we were all in overload and I realized that not only was I leaving him in good hands, I probably didn't take *this* good of care of him all his years at home! As many of you have done, I left him there, and came home alone with only one concern: with a headcount of over 10,000 students, could he get lost in the crowd? What if he became invisible? However, in the weeks that followed, I realized that despite all the wonderful safety nets the university has in place, he was in an environment where the kids all look out for one another. The upperclassmen were very welcoming "Big Brothers"; Classmates proofread and critiqued each others essays; One of his classmates is even a nice Lutheran girl with a local family, who invited Patrick to worship with them and have brunch afterward! This climate of caring for one another has not only made this a very smooth transition for Patrick, it has also been a great comfort to me. I'm only mentioning it because I think it's probably the closest feeling that I've experienced to what God might be feeling about leaving one of his poor children on our doorstep, entrusting them to our care, and then leaving campus to see what happens. Will we reach out to share the gifts He has blessed us with? ...or will His beloved child become invisible with nobody but the dogs to lick his wounds?

At first blush, we might be tempted to almost feel sorry for the rich man in today's Gospel. After all, there's no evidence of any ill-gotten gains, no signs of insider trading, taking or offering bribes, or that he swindled the elderly out of their life savings. For all we know, he was a hardworking and honest businessman, a good man with a nice family.

Whatever he was during his life, we certainly get a clearer picture of him as he cries out for Abraham to send Lazarus with a cold drink. Now we can see he's wearing a T-shirt that says, "It's all about ME (and my family)". Always has been. Always will be.

Sometimes our sins are not so much a list of lies or murders, as much as it is a list of our fractured relationships with one another...and with God. If this rich man had only been in a right relationship with God, the source of every blessing, he wouldn't be so thirsty right now.

He would have traded in that "It's all about ME" T-shirt for one that said "It's all about HIM". He'd know that it was God that had blessed him with more than he ever deserved. He'd know that all the doors that were ever locked to him, God opened for him. He'd know that God entrusted him with an abundance far beyond his "daily bread". In praise and thanksgiving, from that abundance he would have *been* the answer to the prayers of the hungry, homeless man on his doorstep. God gave him the power to be the answer to someone's prayers. But, instead he treated himself to another purple robe or sumptuous meal. Lazarus, beloved child of God, became invisible, as so often happens with the poor.

This rich man never understood that God has a plan, and each of us is an important part of it. It's not like the health insurance plan at work where if you're covered under a spouse's policy, you can opt out and nobody gets hurt. People are already hurting, lots of people. They are hungry. They are homeless. They are unemployed, sick, addicted. Hundreds of thousands are in refugee camps mourning the loss of their entire families, and millions more live right here in NJ. They are the elderly and they are children. They live in Manasquan and in Namibia, in New Orleans and Iraq and Myanmar, which we hear about in the news so much lately. Myanmar might sound pretty far from here, but right at the other end of Rt. 195, Lutheran Social Ministries is still struggling to find funding to resettle hundreds of Burmese refugees who arrived in NJ this summer. God has heard the cries of all His children... cries for justice, and food and consolation. He has answered those prayers in us. We get to deliver the answer. This is what it means to be a child of God. This is the family we belong to and that we welcome little Jessica into today at her baptism. God has blessed us to BE the answer to each other's prayers. We are the channels through which His grace flows, like a river of hope to the hopeless, that they, too, get a taste of that gift of grace.

When it comes to children, parents aren't supposed to have favorites (or ever admit to it) but I suspect that the poor are God's favorites. It would seem that the only way *we* can make that list is by helping the poor. "Invite the poor, crippled, lame and blind to your banquet," Jesus said. "Those you know can never repay you, and you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." I'm sure the rich man wasn't the only one who didn't hear that message here at Holy Trinity on Labor Day w/e, or the subsequent messages these last few Sundays in which Jesus continues to express great concern about how we use our money, what we are to do with it. In terms of the way God judges a society, there is hardly *any value* that God looks at with greater attention than the way that wealth is made and used. What we have received in excess of our daily bread is given so that we can share generously. As the rich man would tell you, "Listen up" because there are no dress rehearsals, no do-overs. He at least wants to send a warning to the others, but Abraham tells him that is not possible... "Even if I sent someone back from the dead, they wouldn't listen", he says.

I'd like you to picture Jesus telling this parable for a minute and think about this: He is on his way to the cross (and he knows it). Every few miles he stops and tells us to remember the poor, in one parable or another. By the time he tells this very graphic story, I get the sense He's raising His voice a bit: "Can you hear me now? I said, remember the poor!" He's making up this story to prove a point to his audience (and to us this morning). WE are the brothers of this rich man. That warning is for US. By telling this parable Jesus is pleading with US not to be guilty of the same sins as the rich man... not recognizing God as the source of every blessing; not hearing (*and living*) the word of God; not seeing the invisible poor that God has placed on our doorstep; not generously and joyfully sharing the blessings

God gave us with his favorites, the least, the last and the lost among us. In this parable, Abraham is pretty clear. The chasm between our selfish, sinful selves and the generous and sharing people that we are called to be is too deep to cross.

Through his death and resurrection, our Lord Jesus becomes the bridge over that chasm that makes it possible for us to be in a right relationship with God, the Father. This morning, we are invited to cross that bridge, and come to the Holy Meal that changes everything... partake of Him, *who did come back from the dead* to make all things new. When we receive this Holy Meal, we walk away with new eyes that can see the invisible poor and new ears that can hear their cries of injustice. When we receive this Holy Meal, we walk away with a new heart, the generous heart of Jesus, ready to share from the abundance we have received.

In our baptism, we are called to be more than hardworking and honest businessmen/women. But are we rich enough to end world hunger? Actually, together, *we are*, (even without Bill Gates) and therein lies the frustration of the ELCA World Hunger program. They know that if each one of us increased our offering by only 1% per year, Lutherans alone could end world hunger...*in our lifetime*. Together, we have been given the power to answer the prayers of poor. Lutheran Social Ministry organizations in this country already touch one in every 50 lives the US and Caribbean. There are 66 million Lutherans worldwide, according to the LWF. Just imagine the possibilities! So, this is quite a family Jessica is joining today. It is a family with a job to do and a family with the resources to do it.

My prayer for us this morning is that the Holy Spirit strengthens us for the work that lies ahead. My prayer for the poor this morning is taken from one of Mother Theresa's prayers: "Give them this day *through our hands* their daily bread." In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.