

*September 26, 2004*  
*Pentecost 17C*

Today we hear the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus.

Jesus has been arguing vehemently with the Pharisees.

He had just finished telling them a story about a rich man and how you cannot serve two masters...  
You cannot serve God and Mammon.

Mammon is a word we don't really use much nowadays, but it really means the 'things of this world.'  
money...but even more than just money.  
attention and fame of this world.

Jesus had been making clear to the Pharisees that there are two masters competing for our loyalty.  
God and mammon.

And we must choose who our master will be.

Now, remember, the Pharisees were lay people...very dedicated to God...  
who were resisting the materialism of  
the Jewish leadership.

They were trying to purify the church and call them back to their roots.

So they may very well have heard this story and agreed with Jesus' point...  
thinking of course that he was  
referring to the Jewish leaders...  
the Sadducees.

He certainly wasn't speaking about THEM!

But, as Jesus had harsh words for the the Sadducees...  
he had equally harsh words for these  
Pharisees.

And so he tells a story of a rich man and a beggar named Lazarus.

The name Lazarus means "The one whom God helps."

This is not the same Lazarus Jesus once raised from the dead...  
the brother of Mary and Martha.

And this is not a real event that took place but rather a parable...  
a story Jesus made up to teach a lesson.

Well, this rich man was amazingly rich...  
he dressed in purple and fine linen.

Purple was a very expensive dye made from crushing small shells found in the Mediterranean Sea.

To dress in purple clothes was to wear the most expensive clothes available.

And he also wore fine linen...

It is a word referring to a rare Egyptian cotton...  
a material used for underwear.

Only the wealthiest people could afford underwear.  
So this man was astoundingly wealthy!

And we are also told that this man lived in luxury EVERY DAY....  
some translations say  
ATE SUMPTUOUSLY EVERY DAY.

The emphasis is on EVERY DAY.

In other words this man did not obey Jewish law and fast and put aside luxuries for the weekly Sabbath....

In fact, if he lived that way EVERY day,  
he didn't even give his slaves and  
servants time off for the Sabbath  
observances.

He was not a good Jew.

So Jesus gives listeners a very clear picture of a man consumed by his money and wealth.

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And he lived in a house with a gate...  
most likely an iron gate....  
meant to keep out beggars.

This man kept a healthy distance between himself and 'others' not like him.

And as was common in those days,  
there was a beggar who was carried  
daily to the rich man's gate...  
and laid there.

The only reason his friends would have brought Lazarus to THIS man's gate every day....  
even when the rich man paid no  
attention to him...  
was because he must have been  
the only person in that town who  
could help him.

You see Jewish law called for those who were wealthy to invite into their homes, beggars,  
who could sit on the floor in the dining  
room during dinner,  
to both pick up any crumbs,  
but to also receive any  
leftovers.

It was the lowest seat in the house...  
Not much different than a dog.  
the least honorable position.

Well, Lazarus came daily waiting to be invited into the rich man's house...  
but he never was.

But the wild dogs came and ministered to Lazarus, but not the rich man.

Well both of these men die...  
and Lazarus went to heaven with the  
great Father of the Jews, Abraham.

Lazarus is sitting right beside Abraham now...  
the seat of highest honor for a guest...  
quite a change from his position  
on earth.

And the rich man goes to hell.

But the rich man seems shocked...  
Why isn't HE with his 'father'  
Abraham?  
After all, Abraham is HIS father  
too?  
HE TOO was a Jew by birth!

He asks Abraham for help...  
He now wants to be LAZARUS...  
The one whom God helps.

How quickly things change!

He speaks to Abraham as his Father...  
but what becomes clear is that just  
being a Jew by birth...  
does not guarantee heaven.

But his circumcision would not suffice.  
His ancestry would not suffice.  
God was judging his heart!

Jesus wants these Pharisees to know that how one behaves with what they have...  
especially in terms of those with  
less...says much about one's heart.

If the rich man's heart had been right..  
if he had been a 'good' Jew,  
he would have behaved differently  
toward Lazarus.

And although the rich man argues with Abraham...

wishing he could go back...try again,  
warn his brothers...  
he is told that it isn't  
possible...it's too late.

Abraham tells him that his brothers have Moses and the prophets...which is the scripture...

and that should be enough to convince  
them.

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Now, some believe that this story means that those who are wealthy will be condemned and...  
the homeless have the direct route to  
heaven.

Others think that this story means, 'Give to the poor and you will be saved and go to heaven.'

Many people believe that their salvation will be earned by their good works...  
by the acts of charity they perform...  
that by being a good person they  
will be invited into heaven.

But this parable is not about that at all!

You see, what Jesus is teaching us...  
is that it is a question of the heart,

and if our heart is right we will be  
compassionate toward others not  
as well off as we are.

The rich man's heart was wrong...  
and as a result, he showed no  
compassion.

If our faith is not visible in how we live...  
then we have to question our faith.

Good works come from a strong faith...  
not vice-versa

Faith is the root of the tree...  
Good works are the fruit.

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And one of the sobering things about this story is the sense that there are no second chances after death.

Abraham says...  
'You have the scriptures. That should  
be enough to convince you.'

Is it enough to convince us?

Do we know the scriptures well enough to be convinced by them?

Do our lives show evidence of our faith...  
especially as we relate to those who  
have less?

Do we reach out with what we have to others, or do we create barriers, iron gates, to keep us separate?

Remember, Jesus didn't just send a donation to the local leper colony...  
He went to them and embraced them!  
He gave of his time...  
He touched them!

And who are those who have less than we have?

Certainly its those who have less resources....less money...but that's not all.

If we are blessed with families and friends...  
then those who are alone have less and,  
our faith should lead us to share  
our time with them.

Today many have less of a place to live than we have after the ravages of the hurricanes.  
How do we reach out and touch them?

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The chest pain and shortness of breath were signs to Bill Clinton of the physical condition of his heart.

Our giving to others is a sign of the spiritual condition of our hearts.

We have time that others don't have.  
We have talents that others don't have.  
We have treasure that others do not.

Time, talent and treasure.

That's what we are called to share with others as an outgrowth...a fruit of our faith.

At the end of the day, this parable offers a great insight into the mixed blessings of possessions.

While they have a great potential for good, possessions can also create and feed self-centeredness and, in the process,  
dull our sensitivity to both the rights  
and the needs of others.

Throughout the Bible it is clear that material possessions belong to God and not to humans.

What we do with our possessions profoundly influences every area of our lives in this world and the next.

Amen.

