

## Sermon Summary 9-25-22

Have you heard the one about the 80 year old husband and wife, who both died at the very same time? When they got to heaven, they were astounded by the spectacular beauty they saw there? Lush, rolling lawns, bright Technicolor flowers, brilliant sunshine, gentle breezes, and the crowning touch – as far as the man was concerned – the most incredible golf course he had ever seen. It was spectacular! With disgust, he looked at his wife, and said to her with disdain in his voice “You! If it weren’t for you and all those healthy bran muffins, we could have been here 20 years ago!”

What is heaven going to be like? For those of us who call ourselves Christians and stake our lives on the reality of heaven, we often try to imagine what heaven will be like. Will we have bodies there, or will we just be spirits? Will we recognize the people we loved on earth, or will we love everyone? Will there truly be no weeping and pain in heaven; but only love and joy? There are so few descriptions of heaven in scripture, so we wonder about these things.

The amazing truth is that Jesus often revealed heaven to us in the scriptures. Many times, when he tells a parable, he does so by setting up the story in this fashion: the Kingdom of heaven is like... The Kingdom of heaven is like the man who had two sons, and the younger of the sons came and asked for his share of the inheritance. The Kingdom of heaven is like the woman who lost a silver coin, and when she found it, she threw a party. The Kingdom of heaven is like the workers in the field: some came at 8:00 o’clock, others came at noon, and still others started work at 3:30. If you study the scriptures long enough, you will find lots of descriptions of heaven.

When Jesus told the story that is our gospel lesson for today, it’s hard to know whether he is telling us about heaven or telling us about hell. But I guess, if you know about one, then you know about the other. In any event, this is the story Jesus told.... “There were these two guys,” Jesus said. One of them was very wealthy. He dressed in the finest clothing from around the world, he ate elaborate spreads of food and drink every day, and for him, life was very, very comfortable.

Lazarus, on the other hand, was very, very poor. Of all the parables that Jesus told, this is the only time he identifies one of the characters by name, which makes me wonder if this isn’t a story that really did occur. Lazarus was very poor, to the point that he laid at the gates of the rich man’s home, hoping that some food scraps would fall off the table for him to eat. He was gaunt, and emaciated, and the sores on his body became a sort of licking post for the dogs who also hung out there.

Now, you would think, listening to Jesus tell this story, that Lazarus and the rich man had nothing in common. One was comfortable, the other was miserable. One lived in the lap of luxury, while the other lived in the gutter. Their stories were miles and miles apart, and, truth be known, they had nothing in common except this: they both died. They both died. It didn't matter that one was rich and the other poor, they both died. In fact, death is the greatest common denominator among all of us. It does not discriminate between rich and poor, Black and Asian, male and female. Statistics tell us that 100% of us are going to die. We don't know when, and most of us don't know how. But this much we know is true: each of us is going to die.

If we knew the exact day and hour, we could go through life with reckless abandon, eating, drinking and being merry, and then, in the final moment, become religious and cling to God. But we don't know the day and the hour. If we believe that there is a heaven and a hell, and if we believe that we go to one of those places when we die, then we need to always be ready, because we never know when our time is going to come. And that's what the rest of this parable of Jesus is all about today.

Lazarus and the rich man both die, but this is where the similarity ends. Because one goes to heaven, and is seated there comfortably for eternity. The hunger is ended, the sores are healed, the tears have all been dried. But as for the other, his misery is just beginning. The comfort he knew on earth is only a fading memory in the midst of his suffering in Hades. And now he is the one longing for relief — a cold drink of water.

The interesting thing about this parable is, it doesn't tell us why one went to heaven and the other to hell. We're left to interpret that for ourselves. Could it be that the rich man went to hell simply for being rich? And that Lazarus went to heaven simply because he was poor? Or is there more to it than that? I think there is. I think there is.

At the end of their respective lives, the rich man's hands were full and the poor man's hands were empty. That is to say, the rich man was clinging to his wealth, and his power, and his prosperity, and he had need of nothing. He was self-sufficient in every sense of the world, and perhaps he thought he was invincible. When Muhammed Ali was at the height of his boxing career, he was on a commercial airline, and upon take-off, the flight attendant asked Ali to put on his seat belt, but Ali refused. "The plane will not take off until you put on your seat belt" the flight attendant warned. Ali stood up and said "I am Superman, and Superman don't need no seat belt!" And the attendant said "And Superman don't need no plane, neither!"

So the rich man in the parable saw that his hands were full and he had need of nothing. But the poor man's hands were empty. No house, no money, no titles, nothing. The poor man had need of everything...including the gifts that God could give. His hands were open

wide, and he gratefully received the gift of grace. That's why one went to heaven, and the other did not.

When we come before God, we too have a choice. We can come, clinging to all our worldly stuff; to our car keys, and our house keys, and our checkbooks, and our college degrees, and our professional titles. Our hands will be full, but our hearts will be empty. Or we can come to God without anything; humble, broken, needy. We come with empty hands, asking for God to bless us. Think of that this morning when you come forward for Holy Communion. If you come filled with pride over what you have, or what you've done, or who you think you are, your hands will already be full and there'll be no place to put God's gift. But if you come empty handed, with humility, and with need, God will place in your hands, healing, and hope, and the Gift of Life itself. But it's your choice, you see.

And finally, this. The parable of Jesus ends with a stunning turnabout, because for the first time in the story, the rich man is concerned for someone other than himself. "Father Abraham," he says, "I have these five brothers who need to know what I now know, so that they won't have to spend eternity in this miserable place. Can't you send Lazarus, or somebody to tell them to change their lives?" Suddenly, there is an urgency in his voice; a concern for people he loves, to know the truth about heaven and hell. He pleads with Abraham...pleads with him to send a messenger from heaven. But surprisingly, Abraham says no. If they haven't accepted the messengers on earth, they're not going to believe someone who rises from the dead. Jesus is probably referring to himself, and that fact that, even after the resurrection, there were many who would not believe in him.

What a dilemma. Five brothers, wealthy and proud just like he was, racing through life with reckless abandon, clinging tightly to their possessions, unaware of the tragic future that awaits them. And nobody to tell them the truth.

In a very real sense, those five brothers live yet today. They are everywhere, all around us. Oh, they're not all wealthy. They're not all proud. They're not all selfish, or mean-spirited, or closed-minded. They're not even all brothers; some are sisters, or neighbors, or friends. But if they don't know the truth about God's grace, and if they aren't ready to die and stand before the judgment of God, then they are all lost, just like those five brothers. Who will tell them? Who will speak to them the message of forgiveness, and life, and love, so that they're not lost anymore?

This past week, nine of us spent time learning all we could learn about small group ministry at a place called Willow Creek Community Church in Barrington, Illinois. It's a huge church, enormous actually, and it made me appreciate coming home to this small-but-growing congregation known as Our Savior's of Stillwater! But for 25 years, Willow

Creek Community Church has operated under a simple purpose statement regarding their ministry, and it is this:

“God cares about lost people,  
and so should we.”

There are many lost people in our community and in our circles of influence, who do not know Jesus Christ. And now we are the wealthy ones, wearing the purple robes of royalty, feasting on bread and wine and grace. And these lost ones are lying at the gate, and though their hands may be full, their hearts are empty. They're looking for something and they're not even sure what it is. And we have it. We have what they're seeking. Paul Tillich said it this way:

“A Christian is simply one beggar  
telling another beggar  
where to find food.”

We've been found, they're still lost. God cares about lost people, and so should we. The time is urgent. We never know what tomorrow holds. And those five brothers need to hear the message of grace before it's too late. So, who will tell them? Thanks be to God, it's now down to us! Amen

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Remember: We are blessed to be a blessing