

Greetings and blessings! First, I want to give thanks to God for each of you and the ways you love and serve God and neighbor daily – whether inside the community of your congregation or in your day to day activities. Every bit of witness matters!

Today's text seems simple enough – a rich man and Lazarus, who is a beggar. During their life on earth one has an easy time of it, and the other a rough go. The tables get turned once they both die and move on to life beyond this one. We could stop and say, “be wary of what you do in this life, because it may affect the next one.” A wise lesson indeed.

I spend a decent amount of time on social media (my wife would say, TOO MUCH!), and a colleague of mine who lives in the Washington DC area posted a recent observation:

The other day, I walked past Bill Gates – the founder and CEO of Microsoft – on the sidewalk going through a neighborhood in DC. The next day, walking past the same spot, there was a homeless-looking man sitting in the grass and smoking pot. Which one is better off?

If we follow the convention of today's parable in the gospel text, the answer would be “the homeless-looking man.” But that can't be right, can it?

Bill Gates, while building a company from the ground up, the world of computers literally running on Microsoft, has done much for the world. He might be a billionaire, but he's also given a lot of that money to charity and dedicates his life now to philanthropic work all around the world.

The homeless-looking man, however, what has he done?

I suppose we could rationalize that perhaps Bill Gates has made his billions while not taking care of his employees appropriately, or that he's given a disproportionate amount of his wealth to others while keeping much of it for himself. The homeless-looking man, however, may be in his situation due to a run of bad luck, unfortunate events, some unjust set of circumstances.

The problem with this line of thinking, however, is that whatever side you fall on, you end up defining their value before God in terms of your standards (or the worlds), rather than God's.

We have to go back a few verses in Luke to really understand this parable. *"The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him. So Jesus said to them, 'You are those who justify YOURSELVES in the sight of others, but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God. The law and the prophets were in effect until John came; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is proclaimed, and everyone tries to enter it by force.'" (Luke 16:14-16, emphasis mine)*

God's ways are not our ways. God's intentions are not our intentions. The Kingdom of God does not work the way the world does. This is a common theme in the gospel of Luke, and helps us make sense of today's parable.

The problem with the rich man isn't so much that he's rich – the problem is his lack of regard for anything but his own skin. He goes through life on earth totally unaware of those around him – even those poor beggars sitting outside his gate. And even in his life beyond earth, he still thinks he can call the shots – "cool my tongue; send Lazarus back to warn my

brothers.” Yet, Abraham, the Israel’s founding father, proclaims, *“If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone rises from the dead.”*

In other words, he’s trying to justify himself – his own existence, his own importance.

Yes, Jesus tells this parable to foreshadow his own death, but the more important message is this: we human beings tend to interpret everything in an attempt to justify ourselves – scripture, theology, our personal beliefs, and our day to day behavior. How often have you heard someone rationalize, “well, I’m not THAT BAD” or hear people pick random passages out of the Bible to justify their own beliefs or stances? Perhaps you even do it. I know that I do, sad as that is that a pastor admits that.

Yet the point of this text is that in the end, human beings are all the same. Like Lazarus and the rich man, we will all die. And, like Lazarus and the rich man, we belong to the Kingdom of God, both in this life and the life to come. However, when we think that we have to try to take life by force, we miss out.

We think the goal is to do the right things now so we can get into Heaven – we miss out on the mercies and graces that God bestows on all of us in this life.

We think the goal is to make justice a reality by force – we lose our compassion, empathy, and dare I say love of neighbor – especially our enemies...which Jesus had something to say about.

We think the goal is to minister, witness, or evangelize, because we think people need Jesus or we need to “proclaim the Gospel” – we don’t see Jesus or God working among us.

What would it look like if we let go of our preconceived notions of what a family member or friend need? Of what the Commonwealth of Virginia or the United States needs? Of what our society needs? What if we gave up our agendas that lead to us taking things into our own hands, making it happen on our own?

I wonder, perhaps we would see and sense God at work among us more often. We would trust a bit more, and be gracious a bit more with ourselves and one another. We would be drawn to things that all humans hold in common – suffering, trials, even death. We'd stop trying to take matters into our own hands.....and that might just be the salvation of us all.