

Pentecost 16c - Luke 16.19-31
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As I listen to the parable that Jesus tells today of the rich man and Lazarus, I can't help but think of the movie *A Christmas Carol*, based on the novel by Charles Dickens. Some of you may be familiar with that movie and the novel. Ebenezer Scrooge has visions in which he is visited by ghosts of Christmas past, present, and future. Each of these ghosts is engaged in helping Scrooge to see how he has lived his life and how the choices that he has made in his life are impacting the real lives of the other people around him. They help Scrooge to take an opportunity for self-reflection and to change his ways to be more kind and compassionate, more charitable and generous.

If I watch that movie with Christ-like eyes, I think in some ways the ghosts of Christmases past, present, and future are really trying to get Ebenezer Scrooge to be more Christ-like, right?! For Scrooge's life to reflect the love, grace, forgiveness, mercy, peace, hope, justice, compassion of Jesus. Yes, I know I am adding things into the story of *A Christmas Carol* that aren't there. But as one who follows Jesus, I can't help but think about that story from the perspective of my own faith. And also my own life.

I can't help but also wonder - how does my life reflect the love, grace, forgiveness, mercy, peace, hope, justice, compassion of Jesus. If ghosts of Christmases past, present, and future showed up in one of my dreams and walked me through my life - What would I see? What would others see? What *DO* others see when they look at my life? Do others see kindness and grace, love and

mercy, justice and hope? Or do others see selfishness and pride, hurtful and hateful words and deeds, and disregard for and lack of care for those around me?

I think that is part of what Jesus' parable today is also inviting us to do - look at our own lives and really take stock for a moment: what do I see when I look at the way I live? The choices that I make? What do others see when they look at the way I live and the choices that I make?

Do people see Jesus when they see me? Or not? Do others truly see kindness and grace, love and mercy, justice and hope? Or do others see selfishness and pride, hurtful and hateful words and deeds, and disregard for those around me?

People probably see both - because we are all both saint and sinner, at the same time. We make choices and live lives that are filled with joy and peace, grace and compassion, kindness and hope. But we also live lives and make choices that do not reflect the values of the gospel. That do not reflect the gift of grace and forgiveness that has already been given to us. We all live like Jesus, and we live like Scrooge - or the rich man in the parable today.

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus also shares with us a vision - much like the Christmas ghosts - of someone who gets an opportunity to look at his own life. I know that the parable includes both the rich man and Lazarus, but the rich man is the one who is engaged in the conversation with Abraham. So, let's take a look at this rich man and his life. The rich man has significant wealth. Jesus describes him as dressed in purple and fine linen and having sumptuous feasts - all things that indicate that this man has significant wealth.

In the first century, there would have been some assumptions made concerning those who were wealthy:

First, those who were wealthy were thought to be more honest, more upstanding, more deserving in society. It was common then - and it is also common now! - to equate wealth with virtue.

Good people who work hard and live righteously can expect to be rewarded. Society says that you get what you deserve, right? So, if people have more wealth, they must deserve it. And people with means are seen as good, smart, hardworking, righteous because they were able to acquire wealth. So, those who were wealthy are often thought of as better and more deserving than others, especially those who were poor. That sentiment is still very strong today, right?!

So, that's one assumption made about the rich man - because he was rich, he must have been good and deserving of his wealth.

Another assumption made about the rich man - especially in the first century - was that he was expected to care for those around him who were poor. Pastor Kendra Moore - in her commentary on this text - notes that it was part of the role of the wealthy in the ancient world to provide alms for the poor in their community. Often there was a bench outside homes where those who were poor could wait for assistance. Someone who sat on this bench at the gate could expect some sort of attention, especially from a feasting host and guests. Scraps and leftovers from the sumptuous feasting would have made all the difference in the lives of people who were hungry and poor, waiting at the gates of the wealthy. Those waiting benches actually existed! They are still present, today, in the excavated site of Pompeii in Italy, outside the large homes of the wealthy.

So, another assumption is that the rich man would have been expected to provide food - even crumbs - to the poor man sitting at his gate.

But it seems that the rich man didn't do that. Because the vision Jesus describes shows the rich man sitting in Hades in agony from the flames. Jesus doesn't tell us precisely what the rich man has done to end up in this predicament. The vision shared is simply that the rich man has died and is in agony in Hades.

I have to wonder, though - Is his agony due to the choices he made in not helping those around him? Is the tremendous reversal of position - where the rich man has gone from being at the height of power, wealth, and authority to the lowliness of agony in Hades - because of how the man lived his life? Let's remember: the man feasted sumptuously every day - and yet never provided poor Lazarus with anything, even crumbs from his table. Perhaps the rich man never even noticed Lazarus right outside his door!

Is that why the rich man is in agony? We don't know, because Jesus doesn't tell us. But like all parables, it's not meant to be explained; the parable is meant to be experienced.

So, when I experience this parable, it makes me think about my own life and my own choices. The parable invites me to consider - Am I providing for those in need? Do I see those in need who are sitting right at my door? Do I notice God's beloved children who are hurting, who are hungry, who are in pain, who are grieving, who are suffering?

Does my life reflect the love of Christ in Jesus that has already been given to me? When people look at me and my life, do they see kindness and grace, love and mercy, justice and hope? Or do they see selfishness and pride, hurtful and hateful words and deeds, and disregard for and lack of care for those around me? What do others see when they see me? Do people see Jesus when they see me? Or not?

For me, that question is also part of the experience of the parable. Because the rich man pleads with Abraham to send people to his family, friends, and community. To warn them. To give them a chance to examine their own lives and choices, their words and actions. So that the people in the rich man's life can have the opportunity to repent, to turn around, to actually see their sisters, brothers, and siblings in need. Many of whom are sitting right beside them!

Maybe the rich man goes a step beyond Ebenezer Scrooge. The rich man is not just concerned about changing his *own* life. Maybe he's even thinking now about how others see him and the way he lives? The rich man is also concerned about how others can also be invited to change their lives, too.

Perhaps Jesus tells this parable so that those who hear it - including us! - can have the opportunity to ask ourselves: How am I living my life? Do my words and deeds reflect the love of God in Christ Jesus? Is God the master of my life? Do I live in ways that love God and love my neighbor? Does my life share gospel values of love, grace, forgiveness, compassion, justice,

mercy, peace, and hope? As the author of First Timothy invites: do I pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness?

And as I examine my own life, I am also invited to think about how my life impacts others - What do people see when they see me? Do they see Jesus? Am I Christ to my neighbor? Does the love of God flow in and through me - outward to the community, to the world, to all creation?

And y'all, just to be clear: We ask these questions precisely *because* the love of God *DOES* flow in us!

You are so loved by God, y'all. You are literally loved by God more than life itself, because Jesus died on the cross for you and for me. You are loved by God so much that Jesus rose from the dead; and in that resurrection, God boldly declares that death does not have the final word. That sin and brokenness, shame and grief will never, ever win the day. In the resurrection of Jesus, God shows that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Nothing, y'all.

You are so loved by God. Y'all are so loved by God. All y'all are so loved by God. All humanity and all creation are so loved by God. Love without measure, in abundance, overflowing. Love that God gives to us simply because God wants to, simply because God chooses to love us - just as we are!

You have been made in God's holy image. There is no one like you in the whole of the universe. You are extraordinary - a holy creation of God, made in God's holy image, and loved by God beyond measure. When you look at yourself, you are looking at a reflection of the majesty of God. Whoa, for real! Just sit with that for a moment - when you see yourself, you are looking at a reflection of the holiness and majesty and unending love of God.

That love is an extraordinary gift from God! God's love - given to us freely - invites us, draws us, holds us in a relationship with God through Jesus. A relationship of love, grace, mercy, justice, peace, hope, forgiveness. It is precisely that relationship that we have with God, that love that God first gives us, that extends from us and through us to our neighbors, to our world, to our community, to everyone, to all creation.

Because God has first loved us, God calls us and expects us and commands us to share that love - in real, tangible ways that make a difference in our lives and in the lives of people around us.

Because we are made in God's holy image, when people see us, they are also witnessing a reflection of God's majesty. So, our lives, our choices, our words, our deeds should also reflect the holiness of God that is in us. When people see us, they should see Jesus.

Y'all, I know that is hard work - to live like Jesus. But wow, living like Jesus is also the most phenomenal gift! And God walks with us every day - Strengthening us with the presence of the Holy Spirit breathed into us. Forgiving us every day when we fall short - which we will do every day. Renewing us every day with God's holy presence. Gifting daily with life, love, joy, peace,

grace, mercy, compassion, justice, hope, and love - so much love! Inviting us to pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness.

Thanks be to God for the amazing gift of God's love and life. Thanks be to God for the gift of relationship with God in and through Jesus. Thanks be to God for the call and command to live our lives like Jesus. Thanks be to God for the opportunity for self-reflection and examining of our own lives. Thanks be to God for the gift of living as witnessing - testifying to God's holy presence in us and through us.

Thanks be to God!!

Amen.