

Uniquely Jesus: My God is My Help | Pentecost 16 | Luke 16:19-31
Pastor Nick Shults | St. Mark Lutheran Church | Sunnyvale, CA

The two men couldn't have been more different.

One, a rich man, dressed himself in the finest clothes each and every day. Decked out in fancy, royal purple robes, even his linen undergarments were of the finest Egyptian cotton. Day after day the rich man welcomed important people into his home where they celebrated and feasted sumptuously on the finest cuisine his money could buy.

The other man was a poor, sick beggar. He wasn't welcomed into the house of the rich man but was laid outside the gate in order that he might beg for help, hoping to receive *something*. His clothes weren't fancy...he didn't wear purple robes or fine linen. In fact, he wore nothing at all except for the excruciatingly painful sores which covered his body.

As he lay outside the gate of the rich man's home, the poor man could overhear the glad celebrations night and day. He wasn't invited to the daily banquets, so that he might fill his stomach with the fine foods the rich man presented to his guests. Instead, he remained outside, longing to have just a scrap, the same scrap that would be thrown to a dog, to curb his rumbling stomach. But such a scrap that would never come.

And even as the rich man's home was no doubt filled with servants who catered to his every need, the only ones who would serve Lazarus were the neighborhood dogs, who came to lick his sores. These two men couldn't be more different.

In life one received everything while the other received nothing. In life one ate, drank, and was merry every day while the other suffered excruciating pain and was treated worse than an animal.

These two men couldn't have been more different.

As Jesus relays this parable to the Pharisees whom Luke reminded us in 16:?? were lovers of money, we also come to find that in one aspect of life both the rich man and the poor man are exactly the same: both face death. Both are human men and neither is able to escape that final enemy of God which is yet to be defeated.

But yet again, this is where the similarities end. The poor man, without a proper burial, at his death is carried to the bosom of Abraham while the rich man, at his death, is honored with a burial but finds himself tormented in Hades.

Now, it's here that we have to stop the retelling of the parable and add a couple warnings. It's easy to read too much into a parable and make it into something that it's not. So what is this parable not? It's not purporting to be a description of the afterlife. Jesus isn't describing in accurate detail heaven or hell.

Also, what this parable is not teaching is this deterministic reversal of roles. AKA - since the rich man had much in this life, he is automatically destined for hades and since the poor man had nothing in this life he is automatically destined for a reward at the side of Abraham.

So if Jesus isn't telling us what heaven and hell are like, if he isn't telling us that the rich will automatically see suffering and the poor will automatically see eternal life, what is Jesus saying?

Well the key lies in another significant difference between the rich man and the poor man. What is that, you ask? Well, it's all in the name. The poor man, Lazarus by name, is the only character in one of Jesus' parables that's given a name. The only one. Google it after the service if you like. But Lazarus is the only character in a parable with a name. Why is that significant? Well, if this is the only time Jesus names one of his characters, then we're going to have to assume that it's significant in some way. And, indeed, the entire key to this parable is wrapped up in the name. Or, more accurately, in the meaning of the name. Lazarus is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Eliezer and Eliezer means "My God is My Help". My God is my help.

You see, our friend Lazarus indeed went without in his life. He was left to beg at the house of a rich man who never bothered to welcome Lazarus in. While the rich and elite came and went from the rich man's house, Lazarus' stomach rumbled. While the rich man was clothed in fine clothes, Lazarus was covered with sores.

But his hope is found in his name. "My God is My Help". We heard earlier that the Pharisees were ones who loved and trusted in money. Just like the rich man, they were focused on material wealth, having the finest clothes and best food. Their trust was in the things of this world.

But Lazarus, his trust was in the Lord. For Lazarus, God was His Help in the midst of the immense suffering of this life. And because of his faith in God, Lazarus is justified before Him and welcomed into the heavenly banquet. Kenneth Baily, a biblical scholar, notes that to be taken into Abraham's bosom means to be in the place of honor at Abraham's banquet table. Just as the apostle John is reclining in the bosom of Jesus as they eat the passover meal, Lazarus is reclining at the banquet table with Abraham, and indeed all the patriarchs and saints. For although he was denied a feast in life, in eternity he feasts with the Lord.

--

But how else can we apply this? Well, look to the parable and see yourself in Lazarus. As you listen to the words of Jesus, notice that in Lazarus we find ourselves. We bring nothing and can offer nothing to God. We come to him a poor beggar. Nothing in this life can sustain us on into eternity. Only Jesus can do that for us. Thus, our help is in our God who has revealed himself in Jesus.

Whether we find ourselves to be rich or poor in this life, we are all beggars before God. There is nothing that we can do or earn or achieve that will get us into His heavenly banquet. Rather, God welcomes us in on account of Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection for the forgiveness of our sins. Even poor beggars like us, God makes us rich by his mercy and grace.

Even here and now...and, indeed, this morning, as we receive the body and blood of Jesus, Jesus makes us beggars rich in him. All that we have, we are given by Christ. We come to him this morning searching for sustenance, for clothing, for security. And in Him, we find it. We are sustained in our faith and our love for our neighbor through his promise of forgiveness. We find ourselves clothed in Christ and his mercy. [how does Paul use this metaphor?] we are wrapped in Jesus. And we find ourselves welcomed to his feast as his guests of honor. Each one of us is placed at the position of honor.

--

The parable of Lazarus and the rich man seeks to show us our true identity. While, in this life, we long to be the rich man, Jesus calls us to be Lazarus. Jesus calls us to come to him with nothing. Jesus calls us to see that all we have is nothing compared to who he is. But most of all, Jesus calls us to see that "My God is My Help". It's a call to faith. It's a call to see that in Jesus and in him alone do we receive all that we need for this body and life. And in Jesus and Jesus alone do we receive all that we need for life eternal...for...Our God (who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ...born, crucified, and risen) this God is our Help. Amen.