

There are so many injustices today, aren't there? There's the Catholic abuse scandal. Human trafficking right here in our own city. Ongoing genocide and ethnic cleansing in Sudan. Religious intolerance and persecution in the Islamic world. Then, all the casualties of the innocent in the Mexican drug war. And that's just to name a few.

Right now, there are so many debts going unpaid. So many scores yet to be settled. So much justice still unserved. In the Gospel Reading, it's kind of nice to see things get squared up for a change.

I mean, here's this rich man. Jesus describes him as going overboard with his spending. He's all dressed in purple, which is code for wearing the most excessive, opulent, flashy attire money can buy. You see, at that time, purple dye was so expensive—more costly even than gold—that it was practically synonymous with royalty. And not only that, this rich man feasts sumptuously—not just on occasion, not just once-a-week, but—*every single* day. For ancient Israel, there were special days when feasts would be held, much like we do here in America yet today. But this man treats every day—maybe even every meal—as if it is a pants-stretching, gut-busting, an all-you-can-eat buffet. And all this he does while poor Lazarus—suffering, starving, dying Lazarus—is just lying there, right outside his front door. Now, I don't know about you, but when I hear of such callousness, such coldness, such cruelty—the rich man not even sparing an old shirt from his closet or even a crust of bread—my blood boils.

Well, the Bible is clear that it's not up to us to mete out justice this side of heaven. God has established the secular authorities to do that—it is they who wield the sword and punish the wrongdoer. And should some criminal get off on a technicality, God tells us that we aren't to go out looking for some vigilante justice. No, the Lord promises "Vengeance is mine." In the end, God says *He* will see to it that wrongs are put right, that the guilty are punished, and their victims vindicated. That's God's job, not ours.

So, here we get a glimpse of how God will keep that promise. On the one hand, Lazarus, who lived a life of poverty, suffered horribly in body, and wasn't shown any compassion at all gets a special place of honor—literally, the last shall be first. Jesus says the angels carry dear Lazarus to Abraham's side, which is an old Jewish expression that means he was carried to the very heart of God.

Then, on the other hand, the first shall be last. The rich man—greedy and gluttonous, hoarding everything for himself and sharing nothing—he just dies and is buried, and finds himself in Hades, where he's in such fiery torment that he calls to Abraham to send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water to cool his tongue. But notice how, even when he's in anguish, the rich man still doesn't repent. Surprisingly, nothing's changed—he can still only think about is himself, worried about his own comfort. He treats Lazarus like an underling, calling him to fetch a glass of water, without any concern for the flames or other perils Lazarus might have to endure just to reach him with that cup of water. So, it's satisfying—isn't it—to see the heartless and cruel, the merciless and unjust, finally get what they deserve.

Y'know, I heard a funny story about an elderly woman in Florida. She'd just finished her shopping and was going out to her car. But as she was walking, she noticed four adult males in the act of making off with her vehicle. So, she dropped her shopping bags and drew out the handgun she kept in her purse. And at the top of her lungs, she screamed, "I have a gun, and I know how to use it! Get out of the car – NOW!"

Startled, the four men scrambled out of the car and took off. The lady then, shaken by the incident, proceeded to put her things away. She loaded her shopping bags into the back of the car and climbed into the driver's seat. Her hands still shaking, she tried over and over to get her key into the ignition, but she just couldn't.

Suddenly, she realized why. It was the same reason she'd found a football, a Frisbee, and two 12-packs of beer in the front seat. A few minutes later, she found her own car parked four or five spaces further down. She then loaded up her bags into her car, and drove to the police station to report her mistake.

As she told her story to the Sergeant, he couldn't stop laughing. Halfway through, he pointed to the other end of the counter, where there were sitting four men white as sheets. They were reporting a carjacking by a mad, elderly woman described as Caucasian, less than five feet tall, with glasses, curly white hair, and carrying a large handgun. Fortunately, no charges were filed.

Now, funny as that it is, do we find ourselves making a similar mistake today? I don't mean that the guilty aren't guilty. What I mean is, to think we are the good guys here. To think that there aren't other people who could point at us and report our crimes.

It's telling, isn't it, if by default you see yourself more like Lazarus, the victim, than the rich man. But just think, which end of the spectrum are you and I really on? Well-fed and well-clothed, access to great healthcare—definitely not homeless. And what have we done with such wealth? Do we spend most of it on ourselves? Are we guilty of excess? If we are generous with any of it, is it really so generous if we give out of our abundance and don't even miss it? It turns out, at first glance our lives look more like the rich man's, and not so much like Lazarus'.

And while here we're living large in this life, what will that mean for the next? We can't take it with us. Anything we've built for ourselves, any lifestyle we now enjoy, can't follow us into eternity. No, before Almighty God, we are poor, wretched sinners, with nothing to show for ourselves. Truly, in the eyes of our Lord, we are poor in spirit, impoverished in soul, needy when it comes to our standing before Him.

But, as dramatic as Jesus' parable is, it's nothing compared to the weight of His words in the Sermon on the Mount. How about this—"Blessed are the poor in spirit," Jesus says, "for theirs is the kingdom of God." (2x) If you feel empty right now, with nothing to offer God, then it turns out that—as far God's concerned—you actually have way more in common with Lazarus than you ever could the rich man.

You see, the rich man didn't find himself in Hades because of his wealth or because of what he did or didn't do with it. If that were the case, then there wouldn't be any hope for anyone, since nobody perfectly uses the gifts of God in the way he intends. No, the problem was that he was smug, always self-righteous, always feeling rich in himself toward God. In fact, just a few verses before this parable, Luke tells us about the Pharisees, who he reports were lovers of money. Jesus says to them, "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God." At the time, the Pharisees had it all wrong—they assumed that wealth and prosperity were a sign of God's blessing. So, the rich man is a symbol of the Pharisees, who figures if he's been given so much it must only be because he'd found favor in God's eyes. But remember the rich man's wakeup call in Hades, his sanctimoniousness still didn't change—he never took stock of his true sinful condition, so he never put faith in God's mercy. Prophetically, Jesus says at the end of our text, "If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead." After Christ's resurrection, I don't remember hearing about any mass conversions among the Pharisees.

But that's not you—at least, not in the sight of our Lord. Should you feel poor in spirit today, divested before Almighty God, then you're just like Lazarus. Lazarus, because of his difficult life, never thought of himself higher than he ought. He knew he was nothing, and so he looked to God to do what God does best, show mercy. Maybe that's why Jesus calls him Lazarus—the name Lazarus literally means "mercy." And if now you find yourself in Lazarus' position before God, your name might as well be Mercy too since that's exactly what God shows you.

After all, just like Lazarus, you also have a Rich Man in your story. Here you are, lying at His gates, dead in your trespasses and sins. There's nothing you can do to improve your situation, just like Lazarus was too weak to even fight off the dogs from licking his sores. But the Rich Man in your story is night-and-day different from the one in today's parable. Your Rich Man isn't the type that puts Himself first, but came not to be served but to serve and give His life as a ransom for many. The Rich Man you have doesn't dress in luxurious clothes or pig out at banquets while you waste away, but clothes you in righteousness and spreads a table before you. And while this Rich Man might also die, be buried, and go to Hades, He surprisingly rises again, to bear you safely with Him to Abraham's bosom. "Blessed are those who are poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God."

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First Sunday after Trinity
Luke 16:19-31

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So, there's enough injustice in the world, don't add to it. Rather, in Christ all justice has been served—every account is settled, not one is left outstanding, not even your own. You have Christ Jesus, the Rich Man in our own personal story, showing you mercy. He holds nothing back from you—not even His own life—to fill you up and make you rich toward God. And now you have a chance to share this newfound wealth with others who are in need. You too can be a rich man in the lives of people—always generous, ever merciful. Until that day when the last shall be first, the day you are carried to the very heart of God.