

**Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church**

**4th Sunday in the Season of Peace**

**September 25, 2022**

**Luke 16:19-31, Galatians 5:13**

**“What’s in Your Carry On?” by Rev. Sue Trigger**

**Luke 16:19–31 (CEB)**

“There was a certain rich man who clothed himself in purple and fine linen, and who feasted luxuriously every day. At his gate lay a certain poor man named Lazarus who was covered with sores. Lazarus longed to eat the crumbs that fell from the rich man’s table. Instead, dogs would come and lick his sores. “The poor man died and was carried by angels to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. While being tormented in the place of the dead, he looked up and saw Abraham at a distance with Lazarus at his side. He shouted, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me. Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I’m suffering in this flame.’ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received good things, whereas Lazarus received terrible things. Now Lazarus is being comforted and you are in great pain. Moreover, a great crevasse has been fixed between us and you. Those who wish to cross over from here to you cannot. Neither can anyone cross from there to us.’ “The rich man said, ‘Then I beg you, Father, send Lazarus to my father’s house. I have five brothers. He needs to warn them so that they don’t come to this place of agony.’ Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets. They must listen to them.’ The rich man said, ‘No, Father Abraham! But if someone from the dead goes to them, they will change their hearts and lives.’ Abraham said, ‘If they don’t listen to Moses and the Prophets, then neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead.’”

**Galatians 5:13**

God has called you. God has called you to be free. What an amazing gift and a great responsibility. What you do with your freedom can affect everyone around you; for good, for bad. God did not give you freedom as an excuse to do whatever you want. To live selfishly, to live sinfully without regard for others.

The strange thing is; he gave you freedom so that you might choose to become a servant. God wants us all to make the choice to reject our sinful nature, our selfish desires, our ego, our flesh, and embrace one another with love. Instead of our striving to fill our emptiness, with things of this world we give freely to others the fullness given to us by God. You were called to be free only do not use your liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.

The last three weeks have given me a lot of forced bed rest which gave me plenty of time to watch T.V. The death of Queen Elizabeth II was given a lot of attention. I was thankful for the opportunity to watch this notable moment of history.

A couple of weeks ago, Mitch and Stewart told us that the fact that the queen died at Balmoral meant that her final journey to St. George chapel would begin with a memorial service at St. Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh. I was glad that the service was televised. It was an opportunity to experience a Presbyterian worship service at the “mother church”. I could see the roots of our Presbyterian traditions on display. The order of service, the Scriptures read, the hymns that were sung – I knew them all. Perhaps most noteworthy was the welcome in which the presiding reverend welcomed all to “the High Kirk, the parish church of Edinburgh. Here where John Knox confronted Mary Queen of Scots, here where James the 6<sup>th</sup> argued about liturgy, here Oliver Cromwell preached, here where parliament sometimes met, here our late Queen received the honors of Scotland.”

It was an interesting welcome, full of history that highlighted the constant push and pull between England and Scotland. At another point in the service, the reverend said that when Queen Elizabeth worshipped in Scotland, she was a member. In a gentle and loving tone, these comments established the relationship of the church of Scotland with the monarchy. For the Presbyterians, the Queen was a beloved member, but not the head of the church as she was for the Church of England. It was made clear that for Presbyterians, Jesus Christ is the head of the church. No Queen nor King can fill that role, nor can they determine her practices and beliefs.

While watching this unique and beautiful worship service, I was reminded of exactly why the founders of the United States were determined that no faith will be named as a state church. In this new nation, no president should ever be able to demand allegiance of the church. Our allegiance is to Christ alone.

I have to confess how much I loved the beauty of the cathedrals where the services for Queen Elizabeth were held. The pageantry and music was extraordinary. But as much as I enjoyed them, I was also a little uncomfortable with display of wealth inherent in all of the services. I couldn't help but wonder how the church, built on Scriptures like we read today, could

become so consumed with elaborate buildings and rituals? It may not surprise you to hear it began with the Roman Emperor Constantine, who legalized Christianity as the state religion. History shows us what happens when the church becomes tied up with empire.

Those who support building grand architectural wonders for worship will say that the high ceilings are designed to draw our attention up to God. The grandness was meant to honor God, the very same God who didn't want King David to build a temple. The same God who allowed Solomon to build a temple saying such an action comes with expectations. "As for this temple you are building, if you follow my decrees, carry out my regulations and keep all my commands and obey them, I will fulfill through you the promise I gave to David your father. And I will live among the Israelites and will not abandon my people Israel." (I Kings 6:13-14) If you follow my decrees, carry out my regulations and keep all my commands and obey them, I will fulfill through you the promise I gave to you. That is a fundamental teaching of the Church.

For the Church, the teachings of Jesus are the starting point for understanding what it means to follow God's commands. When we try to discern how to obey God, we turn to the teachings of Jesus. Today's reading from the gospel of Luke is among those teachings. Anyone with wealth will not like this parable, neither do most clergy who have to preach it. The parable makes us uncomfortable. The rich man, who enjoyed his elaborate life, ends up in hell. Clearly, he was not living as righteous a life as he could have with the resources he had. In chapter 12 of the gospel of Luke Jesus said, "Much will be demanded from everyone who has been given much." In this parable, the rich man kept too much of his wealth for himself and used it to live lavishly. We must be careful to recognize that the rich man does not deserve hell simply because he was rich. The problem was that he misused his wealth. The rich man deserved hell because he had the ability to help those in need and he didn't.

Nichole Torbitzky is Assistant Professor of Religion at Lindenwood University in St. Charles, Missouri. She wrote about this parable. "There is some deep justice in this passage that claims that our judgment will come based on what is possible for us in this life. This is both a promise and a threat. God will keep offering us the best possible and hoping that we take the opportunity to turn our little corner of the world toward the good we can manage. This parable, in

keeping with Luke's major themes, is about justice and responsibility. It claims that there will be justice on the grand scales of existence, and we have some say in just exactly where that justice will be meted out. If we behave properly in this life, then justice will be served here and in the hereafter. If we don't behave properly then justice will be done in the hereafter. Justice done in this world benefits all of us here and eternally. It is by far the better choice to behave with justice while we are still alive. We can assume that if the rich man had behaved properly then he too would be in heaven. But, since he did not, his eternal disposition is one of torment. Justice will be served one way or another, so better to do it right in this life. Isn't that a happy thought?

This parable challenges us in a number of ways, doesn't it? Another way it challenges us is that it doesn't seem to line up with Protestant beliefs that salvation is a gift of grace we can't earn. Jesus implies that selfish behavior in this life affects our place in eternity. Jesus' last line in this parable is helpful here, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.' In other words, we have all the tools we need to live faithfully. God has sent Moses and the prophets to show us the way. If that's not enough to convince us, raising someone from the dead won't convince them either. How many times have we heard people say we need a prophet today, we need someone to show us the way? Jesus' answer to that is in this parable. "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

What we need to remember is that salvation is indeed a free gift, but many, many people cannot accept that gift because they are too sure of their own abilities or they place their faith in the things of this world. But those things are fleeting. We can't take our wealth with us and we can't buy our way into heaven. Like Lazarus in the parable, we're unable to help ourselves. We must depend upon the grace of God. Once we recognize that dependence, then the self-righteousness exhibited by the rich man can become a kind of living that transforms the world into a place of peace, where justice is achieved both here and in the hereafter.

There was a rich man who was near death. He was very grieved because he had worked so hard for his money and he wanted to be able to take it with him to heaven. So he began to pray that he might be able to take some of his wealth with him. An angel heard his plea and appeared to him.

“Sorry, but you can’t take your wealth with you.” The man begged the angel to speak to God to see if the rules could be bent. The man continued to pray that his wealth could follow him.

The angel reappeared and informed the man that God has decided to allow him to take one suitcase with him. Overjoyed, the man gathered his largest suitcase and filled it with pure gold bars and placed it beside his bed. Soon afterward the man died and showed up at the Gates of Heaven to greet St. Peter. St. Peter seeing the suitcase said, “Hold on, you can’t bring that in here!” But the man explained that he had permission and asked him to verify his story with the Lord. Sure enough, St. Peter checked and came back saying, “You’re right. You are allowed one carry-on bag, but I’m supposed to check its contents before letting it through.” St. Peter opened the suitcase to inspect the worldly items that the man found too precious to leave behind and exclaims, “You brought pavement?!!!” (streets paved with gold)

While the services for the Queen were elaborate expressions of worship, there was a consistent thread that makes me think the queen is not in the same plight as the rich man in Jesus’ parable. Elizabeth was a woman of faith. It may be that much of her warmth and her desire to serve the people came from her faith in God. It was lovely to know that she attended worship weekly, even with the Presbyterians when on holiday in Balmoral. Her faith motivated her to work on behalf of others. There is no doubt that she had much wealth, and it is for God to decide whether she did all that she could with the resources she was blessed with, but I think history will show that she certainly lived a life of service.

Living lives of service is central to the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. As Torbitzky wrote, “Contrary to how Americans like to live our lives, our command from God is to care for the poor and vulnerable. This simply cannot be ignored or spiritualized.” Imagine the peace that would come if all who can did all they could to care for those who are vulnerable and living with poverty. Jesus believed that it was possible, if we all do our part. If God gave you one carry on to bring a bit of this life’s treasure with you to heaven, what would be in your carry on? I pray your carry on will be filled with signs of the grace and compassion you shared in this life.

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<sup>i</sup> Torbitzky, Nichole <https://processandfaith.org/lectionary-commentary/september-25-2016-proper-21-nineteenth-sunday-after-pentecost/>