

SERMON
First Lutheran Church
Aitkin, Minnesota

Luke 16:19-31
Rev. Darrell J. Pedersen
March 26, 2017

ADULT MESSAGE

Our world teaches, “**Get all you can. Can all you get. Then sit on the can.**” In today’s text, Jesus tells a story about a fellow who was very good at **canning wealth for himself.**

Just before today’s passage from the Gospel of Luke, we hear Jesus say, **you cannot serve God and wealth.**” The passage goes on, “The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they **ridiculed** Jesus. So he 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.**” Jesus said, “**you cannot serve God and wealth.**” There is **no virtue in being poor.** But **being rich** can be a **curse.** In his story, Jesus is trying to help both people, both ends of the economic spectrum and everyone in-between.

Everyone dies. Nothing goes with us when we die. The only treasure we really have on the last day is **someone loves us and we love them.** And, far more important, that **God loves us and we love God.** In **Genesis 1,** the first creation story, we are told that humans were created in the **image of God.** That means that we have been given the high privilege of being able to be in a **relationship with God,** to communicate with God. In the second creation account, **Genesis 2,** the creation of humans is told in a different way where it is made clear that God made us to be in a **love/trust relationship** with God and in a **caretaker relationship** with people and creation. God said, “**Trust me to love and take care of you.**” Then God said, “**Since I am taking care of you, that sets you free to love and care for the neighbor and the creation.**”

In this life, created in the image of God, we are **called to focus on God,** not on things or on ourselves. The rich man was quite **self-sufficient.** He had no need for God in his life. He could just focus on enjoying his wealth. The poor man was **dependent upon the generosity of others.** **God turned out to be his only hope.** **In the life to come,** God’s people will be **spending an eternity** with the One who is literally defined by “**love.**”

You've heard the verse, "**God is love.**" (1 John 4:8 & 16) And God's people will be spending an eternity with the One who is defined by "**giving.**" "**For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.**" (John 3:16)

The first man, **unnamed** in Jesus' story, was **extravagantly rich.** He was dressed in rare "**purple and fine linen.**" He "**feasted sumptuously.**" His neighbor, the **bitterly poor** man, **Lazarus,** **lay at the rich man's gate,** homeless. His body was covered with **sores** which the **dogs came and licked.** And the poor man was **hungry,** would have been thankful for the **crumbs** that fell from the rich man's table, leftovers maybe. **But the rich man's wealth never made it to the poor man's life.** I eat pretty well. I dress pretty well. I sometimes have to throw away food that gets old in my refrigerator. I have health insurance and a pension plan. I am rich.

You heard the story. The rich man goes to hell. He **wasn't so bad** was he? He just **didn't seem to need God** in his life. The poor man went to heaven. He **wasn't so good** was he? But **he needed God** in his life, and his sufferings from this world were eventually washed away in heaven.

Life is short. Eternity isn't. Death is the great equalizer. **Both men needed God's provision.** One thought he was self-sufficient. One knew that he wasn't and begged for help. Which person are you? **Self-sufficient? Don't need God? Or, totally dependent upon God** for everything and everyone you have in your life? Is anyone in need at your doorstep? Are you in any kind of need – physical, emotional or spiritual? God **sees.** God **knows.** God **cares.** God is always moving to bring about the **best good** in your life and in this world.

Last week, some of you heard me say that **I was worried about** all of the young people who get **confirmed** and **commit to following Jesus,** or who **baptize their children** and **promise to raise them to know Jesus,** or who get **married** and **ask Jesus to help them** in their marriage and then quickly **forget all about worshipping God** or **gathering together with God's people** the church. I need to explain. I wasn't even thinking about whether they would **go to heaven when they die.** I am thinking about all the **love and care** of God that they **may be missing out on** right now, here in this world. And I am thinking about all of the **love and care** that their **family,**

neighbors and world might be missing out on because they may be forgetting that they are **children of God called to serve** the world.

“Finding Each Day’s Joy”

(Alvin Rogness, “My Personal Prayer Book,” Augsburg, Mpls., 1988)

Let your eyes rest on your misfortunes, and you risk bitterness; if on your blessings, you invite gratitude. If you eye your neighbors’ good fortune, you may be tempted to envy; if you focus on their need, you could be stirred to compassion and works of mercy – and to unexpected sources of joy.

Jesus gives us the clue to the whole matter of life’s meaning. To be a servant, he said, is to find fullness. To zero in on one’s own gain or safety is a dead-end street. To be sure, there are satisfactions in being a winner, but not the deep, pervading joy God designed us to find. The person who builds a prosperous business will be gratified with its annual profits, but his deeper joy will be in providing commodities that people need, in dealing sensitively with his employees, in supporting church and community causes, in having a loving family and cherished friends. In Dicken’s *Christmas Carol*, Jacob Marley, the returned ghost, laments his misdirected life, “The dealings of my trade were but a drop in the comprehensive ocean of my business.”

You will find joy at the end of each day as you make two quick inventories:

What blessings has God given me this day?

What people have I reached out to help today?

What blessings? Life itself is one; you have been given another day. You have talents to offer to the possibilities of this day. You have a brain that can think and dream. You have family and friends who love you. Most of all, you have assurance, in Christ, of God’s constant and unending love.

What people? Many have crossed your path. Did you add to their cheer? Were you sensitive to their needs? Did you go out of your way to add a word of kindness, send a letter, make a phone call – some little token to brighten someone’s day? In serving others we find the hidden treasures of the kingdom.

Jesus told a story to the Pharisees who loved money. One man had so much of this world's blessings, more, far more, than he really needed. But, apparently, **he didn't need God**. One man had so little of this world's blessings, not enough. But, apparently, he **knew he needed God**.

Then their last day on earth came. The "**once**" rich man, now languishing in hell, begged for Father Abraham to send the "**once**" poor man, **Lazarus**, to his aid, to give him a drink of water. No, **impossible**, Abraham says. Then the once rich man begged Abraham to send Lazarus to go back from heaven to warn the rich man's family to "**repent**." You may recall that "repent" means "**turn back to God**." Abraham responded, "**They have Moses and the prophets (scripture,) they should listen to them**." The once rich man replies, '**No, Father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent**.' Abraham then said to him, '**If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets (what it says in scripture,) neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead**.'"

In Charles Dicken's "Christmas Carol," Ebenezer Scrooge received visits from three ghosts of Christmas, past, present and future. He also received a visit from his old friend and business partner, Jacob Marley. Those visits, in that old story, were enough to set him free from the **self-centered curse** that hung like chains around his neck. Then he discovered the **joy of love and giving**. He was set free to love and serve his neighbors.

What's the good news in Jesus' story? Is there any word of grace or hope?

1. The One telling this story is on his way to **give his life away out of love** for you, me, the poor man and the rich man.
2. It's not too late to change our lives and our world.
3. All of the brokenness, pain and dying in our world will be wiped away in heaven. No more suffering or death.

The One telling the story has come in **love** for the **rich man**, the **poor man**, **you** and **me**. And after telling this story, Jesus headed for the cross where he then **gave** himself away for you and me. Jesus **adopted** you into God's family. Jesus **walks with** you every day. Jesus **longs to love and care** for you in every way. Jesus **longs to move through you** to love and care for the people and world around you. **Hopeful word?** Us loving and trusting God makes our lives **deeper and more joyful** right now. Us loving and trusting God gives us a **glimpse of eternity** where we will live in

the embrace of a loving and serving God forever. We get a **chance to practice for eternity** right here. And the world will be helped. Thanks be to God. Amen.