

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
I Timothy 6:6-9, Psalm 91, Luke 16:19-31
September 25, 2016
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A businessman in San Antonio parked his brand new car on the street and went off to do some work. When he got back to it, he found a poor, ragged little boy of about eleven examining it with eyes full of wonder and envy.

“Is that your car?” the boy asked.

“Yes,” the man replied.

“It’s beautiful. How much did you pay for it?”

“Well, to be honest,” the man answered, “I don’t know. It was given to me as a present from my brother.”

“You mean your brother just *gave* it to you, and it didn’t cost you a penny?” the boy asked.

“That’s right,” the man nodded.

“Oh, boy, I wish that I....”

The man was sure the boy was going to say, “I wish that I *had* a brother like that.” But that isn’t what he said. What the boy said was this: “*I wish that I could **be** a brother like that.*”

And the man concluded: “There I was in my fancy suit, with the keys to a brand new car in my hand. And there was this little boy off the street. Yet this impoverished kid had more love in his heart than I had. He was richer than I was.”

The rich man in today’s vivid parable doesn’t end up in Hades because he was filthy rich in things, but rather because he was dirt poor in compassion, mercy and benevolence. The letter to Timothy, in less dramatic fashion, simply states that we are “...to do good, to be rich in good works, generous and ready to share....”

In one Bible study class last week, after reading Luke’s parable, we immediately got into a discussion about the nature of Hades. Is there really such a place? Will it be agonizingly hot? And will there be a fixed chasm between there and heaven?

In Marcus Borg’s book, Reading the Bible Again for the First Time, he states at the beginning that the Bible is not meant to be understood literally in all cases, but it is always meant to be taken seriously. I believe this to be one of those cases where Jesus uses extremely exaggerated language to make a very serious point.

It is certainly possible that the rich man could have been so distracted by his wealth that he failed to notice Lazarus right outside his front door, but that’s hard to imagine. Could anyone be so

very cold-hearted that they couldn't even throw a few scraps in Lazarus' direction? If so, then he has already condemned himself to a form of isolation and separation from God and the human race.

We would be wise to remember that heaven and hell are not merely some distant places only to be found or experienced beyond the grave. Heaven and hell begin in the here and now. They are found in our hearts. It is what we do today that builds and establishes the proper foundation for the future.

A father was putting his young son to bed one night. The boy was slowly saying a prayer he had just learned from memory. "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should wake before I die, I pray the Lord my soul to take. Amen." The father realized at the time that the boy hadn't gotten the prayer quite right, but he didn't want to fault him since he had done so well and seemed pleased he had said it all by heart.

Afterwards, when he kissed his son and left the room, he thought more about what the child had prayed, "If I should wake before I die..." He thought to himself, "You know, that is exactly what I want for my son. I want him to wake up to the joys of being kind and generous and not let the world teach him that success in life is measured by how much money one makes."

A disciple asked, "Master, what does it mean to be saved?"

The Master answered, "A piece of bread on a plate in front of a starving person is salvation."

I am convinced from my reading of Jesus' sayings in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke that salvation both now and later is not so much determined by what we believe as much as by how we behave – love God and neighbor as yourself.

As I was writing this sermon in my office last Thursday, the phone rang. Since Jill and Claire were away, I had agreed to stay at church and answer the phone. It was a man in need of a place to sleep for himself and his wife. The easy thing would have been to say, "I'm sorry, but we are low on funds," or "Please call back tomorrow and talk to Jill," but I was writing about how not to be a stingy Scrooge.

The added difficulty with people who call needing a night or two in a hotel is that they usually don't have transportation, which means I have to drive to the hotel if I agree to help them. I did agree to help this gentleman, but not before I asked him to tell me about himself, his wife and their 17-year-old daughter.

The larger question surrounding the parable of the rich man and Lazarus may revolve around class distinctions. Clearly, the rich man could not connect with Lazarus in the least. He couldn't see Lazarus as a human being worthy of any consideration whatsoever. He only saw him as someone to wait on him even after he was demoted to bottom-dweller status. He went so far as to ask if Lazarus will now put some water on his tongue when he never lifted a finger to give Lazarus even a drink when he was outside his house.

The fact of the matter is that we are all more alike than different in our humanity. We all brought nothing into the world, and we will all take nothing out of it, as it says in first Timothy. We are all going to die and be completely stripped of whatever we possessed. We will all face our creator empty handed. According to the Bible, the only treasure acceptable to our God will be a lifetime of good works.

I hope there is not a hot, burning hell, but I suppose there has to be some place for those who never awake to a life of compassionate concern and service to humanity.

If you have any doubt about heaven, let me conclude today with a true story told by an Episcopal priest named John Price. In fact he became so convinced of the importance of heaven that he wrote a book called Revealing Heaven.

Price recalls a woman who joined his church with her infant daughter. After he baptized the child, he never saw them again until the woman attended three years later and told him this amazing story.

She had been feeding her daughter a week after the baptism when milk from the bottle dribbled out of her mouth and her eyes rolled back in her head. The woman rushed her limp baby to the emergency room, where she was resuscitated and treated for a severe upper respiratory infection.

Three years later, the mother was driving past the same hospital with her daughter when the girl said, "Look, Mom, That's where Jesus brought me back to you."

While we are here on earth, then, may we "take hold of the life that really is life." (I Timothy 6:19b) and live forever with him who gave everything, the only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, Jesus the Christ. AMEN.