

26 September 2010  
Pentecost 18

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Knowing God Through the Cross”  
Text: Luke 16:19-31; 1 Timothy 6:6-19

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Don't assume things about God, that you know what God is doing and why He's doing it. That's a dangerous thing to do, although (it seems to me), it's done all the time. Don't assume God is your friend because your life is good, and don't assume God is against you because things are difficult and trials are many. The truth may be exactly the opposite. The man who had been so rich was now eternally poor, and the man who had been so poor was now eternally rich.

The things of this world and life are not accurate barometers of spiritual life. Good things in life are not God's way of "patting you on the back" - He gives good gifts to both the just and the unjust (Matt 5:45). Just because you think that sin didn't hurt you or anyone else and so you can do it again, doesn't make it so. The only thing we can be sure of, the only infallible source of truth, is the Word of God. The Word spoken to us by God through Moses and the prophets and the apostles, and the Word of God become flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. That Word which tells us of, and shows us, Christ crucified. Which, in the end, is all we need to know about God. If you have that, if you have *Him*, you have everything, no matter how poor you may be, no matter how many struggles you may have, no matter what the world thinks.

And we see all of this in the story Jesus tells us today, of the Rich Man and Lazarus. In the end, things were not as they seemed at all. The rich man didn't "have it all" after all. And Lazarus wasn't as poor as he looked. In the end, the psalmist was right: *"Better is the little that the righteous has than the abundance of many wicked"* (Ps. 37:16).

It's not that wealth and riches are bad, they're not. Everything that God created was created good. It's that the sin in us, the sin that we inherited from our first parents and that has adhered itself to our human nature, wants always to turn what God has created good in and of itself, into something bad - into an idol. Into what we fear, love, and trust more than God (First Commandment). And it seems that certain things have this power more than others. Sexuality is one, which is why there is such a problem today with adultery, divorce, promiscuity, pornography, abortion, and

homosexuality. And another is money, which is why people buy houses they cannot afford, have credit card debts they cannot pay, why gambling is an increasingly growing problem, and why so many people are working themselves to death. That's why there are two things in the Bible that God always tells us to **flee** - to run away from as fast as you can: sexual immorality and the love of money.

Again, it must be said, these things aren't bad - sexuality is a good gift from God for a man and a woman in marriage, and the things of this world God created for our use and enjoyment. But as St. Paul told us today, **"the love of money** [and today we could add sexuality there] **is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs."** Now, you may not be able to see those pangs - we can get pretty good at covering them up or dulling them, but do not assume that because everything looks good on the outside, that everything is right on the inside.

*But there are clues.* Because faith is not just an internal thing; faith is lived. And so it is with the Rich Man we heard of today. What are the clues that tell us he had made his riches his god? He was **clothed in purple and fine linen** - he didn't just want to be rich, he wanted everyone to know he was rich, even down to his "fine linen" - or, as we might say today, his designer underwear. **He feasted sumptuously every day** - that phrase "every day" would have perked up the ears of a good Jew back then, meaning that even on the Sabbath, this man wanted his feast. *His* feast, not God's feast. And not even his servants would have a day off for God. And the leftovers from these feasts were most probably fed to his guard dogs - for they didn't keep dogs as pets back then, and strays would have been shooed away by the servants. But they were not given to Lazarus, **who longed for them**. The dogs had more compassion than this man, who's faith and love was firmly nestled in himself and his wealth, and not in God and his neighbor.

But when this rich man dies and his gods are taken away, he has nothing. He is, in fact, poorer than Lazarus. Now he is concerned for his brothers, for they, too, are ignoring the feast that he ignored - the feast of God's Word. *So send Lazarus from the dead, he asks. That'll wake 'em up!* We sometimes think that, too. That miracles will make people believe. That perhaps if God were to come and show Himself to the world, then everyone would believe! But it is not so. Someone coming back from the dead may convince some that there is an afterlife after all, but does not preach Christ crucified. And God did come and show Himself to the world - and He was standing right in front of the Pharisees and speaking to them! But it wasn't the God they wanted. A God who comes and hangs out with sinners. A God who came to be a suffering servant and die for the sin of the world. A God who calls us to repent of ourselves, of our lives, of our loves, of our sins, of our lusts. They didn't want such a God. Neither do we, by nature. We like the gods we have better.

But these gods cannot save; they can only destroy. They turn rich men into beggars.

**But Jesus has come to turn beggars into rich men.** For He was the truly rich man who for our sakes became poor (2 Cor 8:9). Who came to all of us Lazarus,' not to dip only the tip of His finger in water, but to give us the living water of His Word that we may drink and never thirst again (John 7:37-38). Who came not merely to soothe our wounds with the licking of dogs, but to wash and cleanse and heal us from the leprosy of our sin with His forgiveness. And who came to feed us not with crumbs from His table, but with the feast He has come to provide - the feast of His own Body and Blood. And these gifts He comes to give to all people, whether they be rich or poor on the outside, whether they be notorious or hidden sinners - for spiritually, we are all Lazarus'. Crippled and left to die by sin. Wholly dependent on the mercy of God. And so we pray: *Lord, have mercy.*

And He does. Always. Jesus is no rich man that bypasses, steps over, or ignores those in need. Who feeds the dogs and not His children. Never. For whether or not you have riches in this world, the Spirit, through the Word of God - through Moses and the prophets - directs our eyes where true riches are to be found. The riches that poured forth from the cross. The cross which shows us who God truly is, what God has done for you, and how much God loves you. So that we never have to guess or assume the mind of God - the cross is the mind of God. Who came for you, to die for you, to forgive you.

Not that its easy to believe that, especially when you're a Lazarus - dumped and dumped on by the world, with nothing but pain and misery in this life. And if you are a Christian, you can expect to have your faith challenged like this, by the world, by satan, by your own doubts and fears. Maybe even God will send you a struggle, a cross of love, to strengthen you. Maybe not the same as Lazarus, but a cross of a different kind. But know this, too: the Word and Spirit of God will keep you, as He kept Lazarus.

For though Lazarus never speaks in this story, like the rich man, there are clues to his faith as well. After he dies, the angels of God, who watch over and guard His children, come for this child of God, and carry him to Abraham's side. Abraham, of whom it is said: "He believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness" (Gen 15:6). So it is with all true children of Abraham - who are children of Abraham not by physical descent, as the rich man thought, but by faith.

But there is another clue to Lazarus' faith, when Abraham told the rich man: ***"Besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us."*** Now, it makes sense that those in torment would want to cross from there to the comfort of heaven; but who would want to cross the other way?

Why would Abraham say that . . . unless, perhaps, it was Lazarus who was ready to do so. To comfort the one who refused him comfort. To serve the one who refused him service. To help the one who refused him help. For is this not the love of Christ, who did these things for us on the cross? Is this not the love of Christ living in Lazarus' heart?

That is the love that has been given to you. By the one who did cross the chasm - the only one who could - and served you who were dead in your trespasses and sins, to raise you to a new life in Him. A new life of faith and forgiveness, and of love and service - even to those who sin against you.

For now, we bear the cross - but it will not always be so. A day of rest is coming for all who are in Christ. The day of which we sang:

*Lord, let at last Thine angels come,  
To Abr'ham's bosom bear me home,  
That I may die unfearing;  
And in its narrow chamber keep  
My body safe in peaceful sleep  
Until Thy reappearing.  
And then from death awaken me,  
That these mine eyes with joy may see,  
O Son of God, Thy glorious face,  
May Savior and my fount of grace.  
Lord Jesus Christ, my prayer attend, my prayer attend,  
And I will praise Thee without end. (LSB #708 v. 3)*

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.