

J.D. Ousley
Sermon—29Sep19
Lk 16
“That’s Rich”

In the Name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.

I don’t believe in hellfire.

I think that the belief that after evil people die, they will burn forever in eternal fire is an outdated doctrine that came from the limited imaginations of some Christians in the past. I don’t believe a good God would want to torture even his most reprehensible sons and daughters for eternity.

For one thing, the worst person can never do an infinite amount of evil. So, getting infinite punishment is unjust.

For another thing, our God is a loving God who doesn’t delight in human suffering. In fact, our God who was once incarnate *shares* our suffering.

But I recognize that the belief in eternal punishment has entered into the religious imagination by means of Bible texts like the one we heard in our Gospel for today. In that lesson, Jesus tells a story about a rich man and a poor man.

The rich man (who is not named) dresses in fine clothes and eats lavish meals every day. The poor man Lazarus actually lives in front of the gate of the rich man’s house. He is so poor that he dreams of being able to eat the crumbs that fall off the rich man’s table.

Both men die. Lazarus goes to heaven. In Christ’s story, heaven is under the care of the Old Testament patriarch Abraham. The rich man isn’t so lucky; he goes to Hell where he is, he complains, “in agony in these flames.”

From his terrible location in Hell, the rich man is somehow able to see Lazarus in Heaven. So he asks Abraham if Lazarus might possibly dip the tip of his finger in water to cool the rich man’s tongue. But Abraham says this is impossible. Between heaven and hell, Abraham says, “there is a great chasm fixed.”

Now, for me, this picture of the next life is just too primitive to be literally true. I can conceive of a Hell that is a self-chosen *separation* from God. God created us free, and that includes being free enough to act against our best interests. So it might be the case that we have the freedom to detach ourselves from God after we die—even—if it’s a bad idea.

But surely God can find a way to establish a just solution to the world’s problems without torturing people endlessly. Again, no human being, not even a Hitler, can commit an infinite amount of evil—so how could God force any human being to suffer infinite punishment?

Still, Jesus has left us with a vivid story that makes us think. It has served to remind every generation of Christians that it is not enough in life to be indulge ourselves and satisfy our personal needs.

But besides ruminating about the fate of the rich man, we would do well to remember the other main character in the story.

Poor *Lazarus* lived a miserable life on the street, with dogs licking his sores. It is surely one of the hopeful parts of the parable that Lazarus is granted a wonderful existence in Heaven after all that he went through on earth.

He deserved his final reward! That more than compensated him for his suffering at the rich man’s gate.

And, of course, the text is meant to encourage those of us who aren’t poor to look after the poor in our own time. While, as Jesus observed on another occasion, we have “the poor with us always,” we are still obligated to do whatever we can to relieve their suffering.

One aspect of the story that sharpens the issue is the detail that Lazarus spent his days sprawled on the rich man's doorstep! Even the slightest acquaintance with the Hebrew Scriptures would have reminded the rich man that he had some obligation to his pitiful neighbor.

The ending of the story has Abraham noting that selfish people tend to remain selfish. Even when their prophets and teachers tell them that they should be generous, they ignore the warnings.

The rich man has five brothers and he is understandably worried that they will also end up in Hell. But Abraham warns that, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

In fact, Jesus is speaking to all of us, however much money we happen to have—and whatever we might believe about what happens to us after we die.

The point of this cautionary tale is that we are judged by our actions. We can't ignore the suffering of others. And we don't need to be rich to share what we have.

And, for that matter, we don't need to be rich to be *selfish*! It's possible to be relatively poor and still hoard what we have and not offer help that we could offer to those who are more needy than we are.

It's very easy to get caught up in the delights of the material world. Even if we aren't wealthy, the things we have can form a kind of bubble around us. (They can blind us to needs of other people that really matter.)

(Happily, I would observe as an aside that in our parish many people are now getting involved in outreach projects. I would also note that there are many people in Incarnation who strive to give sacrificially to those in need.)

In New York City, we Christians struggle with an additional complication as we follow the teaching of Jesus: in our city, many of the people who are most in need are *invisible*.

Of course, there are lots of poor people who spend much of their time living or begging on the street. In this neighborhood, there are more and more of them.

At the same time though, there are numerous invalids who are shut up in their apartments; they have little to eat and few contacts with the outside world.

So, too, people who are suffering out of sight in distant places—like victims of hurricanes in the Caribbean—those folks, too, are deserving of our attention.

In any event, as our annual Stewardship season approaches, we will be called to take a broad look at our finances. We will get a perspective on how much we are able to offer for the work of God's Kingdom—in the church and other charities.

And at this time, when we are asked to focus on our personal "riches," we might ponder the situation of the rich man in Christ's parable. The man's wealth insulated him from the sufferings of others.

"Richness" in the parable is really a metaphor for the *isolation* that our self-satisfaction can cause us to feel. "I'm happy—why should I worry about the suffering of others?"

Abraham tells the rich man how after death there is "a great chasm fixed" between the man's place of torment and Lazarus's place of joy. But the parable implies that the rich man first established his own "great chasm" between himself and a neighbor whom he could have helped.

A cautionary tale about how things can separate people. Self-satisfaction can isolate people.

And a cautionary tale about how important it is to be good stewards of what God has given us.

And now unto that same God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be ascribed as is most justly due all might, majesty, power, dominion, and praise, now and forever. Amen.