

The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 24-25, 2016
Luke 16:19-31

“Lazarus at the Gate”

Life is full of inequities, isn't it? We speak of the “haves” and the “have-nots” in the world around us. The haves are those with wealth, position, influence, and power while the have-nots are at the other end of the spectrum: individuals or an entire group of people who for a variety of reasons are without these things. Political leaders, if they are wise, will look for solutions to this problem in order to address the growing gap between haves and have nots, but it remains a big challenge. Left unchecked, unresolved inequities and injustices fuel discontent and civil unrest, even as we see this happening across our nation today. Today's Scripture lessons from the prophet Amos (Amos 6:1-7), the psalms (Psalm 146), Paul the apostle (1 Timothy 6:6-19), and our Lord Jesus Christ (Luke 16:19-31) speak to issues that may make us squirm a bit: misplaced priorities, idolatry, love of personal comfort at the expense of others, and the call to do good to those who are in need. Do we see Lazarus at the gate – our gate? Based on Jesus' parable in today's Gospel lesson, the message is entitled “Lazarus at the Gate.” May the Lord's rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus' sake.

Jesus' parable at its core is a story of rejection, and that may be hard for us to hear. Rejection seems cruel. The rich man rejected the poor man who was dumped at his gate and who desperately needed help. In so doing, the rich man rejected his God-given duty found in Moses and the prophets to care for the poor (Exodus 22:21-22; 23:9; Leviticus 19:9-10; 19:33; 23:22; Deuteronomy 10:17-19; 14:28-29; 15:1-11; 16:9-15; 24:17-18; 26:12-15; Isaiah 5:7-10; 30:12; 58:3; Jeremiah 5:25-29; 9:4-6; Amos 2:6-8; Hosea 12:7-9; Micah 3:1-3; Zephaniah 3:1-3; Malachi 3:5), and thereby he rejected God himself. His personal ease and comfort were more important than rendering assistance to another. Because of his callous and continuous indifference, the man is rejected by God. Sound pretty harsh? Remember that we are not judged by our standards for God, but we are judged by God's standards for us. All of this is a call to repentance; to turn from our sin, which is our natural inclination to turn in ourselves, and turn to God.

Note the irony in the parable: the rich man's name is unknown, while the poor man's name is known, Lazarus. His name is the Greek version of the Hebrew name, Eliezer, “My God helps” (Exodus 18:4). God helps when no one else will. The rich man, who led a very self-focused life while he lived, now finds himself in Hades where he calls on Father Abraham to help him, but it's still all about him! He looked at Abraham and Lazarus as his personal servants: **“Send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame”** (Luke 16:24) and **“Send him to my father's house – for I have five brothers – so that he may warn them”** (Luke 16:28). Really? Here's the thing: it's not enough to claim Abraham as your father, or Martin Luther as your reformer, or Jesus himself as your Savior, if you don't do what they call you to do! John the Baptist rose up and condemned the people of his day for this: **“Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire”** (Luke 3:8-9). Can it be any different for us? Our hearing of God's Word, Law and Gospel, must lead to living and obeying that Word in our lives. Please understand that all of this is not a “got to,” but a “get to.” Our responding to God's call to live out the truth of his Word is not even our own doing. This is the work of the Holy Spirit who calls us and keeps us in the one true faith. Our responding to God's call in our lives is not to earn his favor and rack up points to get in good with God. It's not an “if/then” arrangement: *if* I'm good enough, *if* I do enough, *then* God will love and forgive me. No, we operate from a grace-based “because/therefore” understanding: *because* God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish (John 3:16), *therefore* I am set free to love God in return and serve him by serving my neighbor with joy and

thanksgiving. Because of all that God in Christ has done for me, therefore I see all of life as an opportunity to join Jesus on his mission, including doing good in Jesus' Name. Because of what God in Christ has done for us, we say with Paul: **“It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me”** (Galatians 2:20). This means I am now looking for opportunities to live by faith. This means that I see my possessions, my money, my time, my work, my family, my health not as ends in themselves, but as means to a greater and higher purpose. All of these things are gifts from God to manage wisely and faithfully so that others might be blessed through me that God may be glorified through us. This means that my eyes are now open to see Lazarus at the gate – *my* gate – and to respond with compassion and mercy as God has done for us.

The reality is that life will always be full of inequities, injustices, and unfairness. Jesus tells us: **“The poor you have with you always”** (Matthew 26:11). No matter the circumstances, we cannot expect others – government, elected officials, aid and service agencies – to do for us what God calls each of us to do. It becomes an individual responsibility for the child of God to do good and render assistance in Jesus' Name. “Only one life, ‘twill soon be past. Only what’s done for Christ will last.” There is an old Latin phrase that puts it like this: *Dum tempus habemus, operemur bonum*, “While we have time, let us do good.”

One hundred years ago, much of Europe was engulfed in the horror of “the war to end all wars,” as it was called. With World War I, borders and boundaries came to be realigned, and among these was the Austro-Hungarian Empire, ruled by the Habsburg family for hundreds of years. Otto von Habsburg, the last crown prince of the Austro-Hungarian empire before its dissolution in 1918, was laid to rest only five years ago on July 16, 2011 in a colorful ceremony that evoked the glories of the 640-year Habsburg dynasty. The son of Karl Habsburg, who was deposed as emperor during World War I, Otto von Habsburg died on July 4, 2011 at age 98. His funeral took place at St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna, followed by a funeral procession that drew 10,000 mourners to the city's streets... despite his imperial background and personal credentials, Otto von Habsburg could not access his final resting place in Vienna's Imperial Crypt... When the funeral procession arrived at the door of the Capuchin monastery, the master of ceremonies announced his arrival, using his imperial and other royal titles. He was refused entry by the friars within, saying: “We know him not.” Again, the master of ceremonies pounded on the door, this time reading off the academic and political achievements of the deceased. The same reply was given: “We know him not.” Again, a third knock on the door was met with the question, “Who seeks entry?” The humble confession was given, “A poor sinner named Otto,” and the heavy doors swung open to admit his coffin (<http://www.catholicculture.org/news/headlines/index.cfm?storyid=11059>). In truth, at the end of the day, at the end of life, at the end of the world, we are all poor sinners who come into the kingdom of God not by our background or personal credentials, not by any achievements, but only by the grace of God in Jesus Christ. We are all Lazarus at the gate.

Having heard the Word of God, what is that Word of God now calling you to do in your life?
Recognizing that we are all Lazarus at the gate, while we have time, let us do good for Jesus' sake. Amen.