

Sermon for the First Sunday after Trinity

St. Joseph Parish - Father Herb

Luke 16:19-31

June 22, 2025



Jesus gave us a commandment, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" and a promise, "You shall always have the poor with you."

As one commentator has put it, the vivid details of description in this parable of Jesus need little comment. To summarize, the rich man, often called Dives for his wealth, having no need to work, is arrayed in rare royal purple. He wears the softest Egyptian linen underwear and feasts sumptuously as a habit; the destitute Lazarus, whose Hebrew name means, "God has helped" (which He does in the end), is, on the contrary, poor and starving.

Death comes for them both and their fortunes are completely and irrevocably reversed. Time having run out for the both of them, not even Lazarus can help the rich man. Their eternal fates are sealed in the image of the great chasm. While Lazarus lies in the bosom of Abraham, Dives feels Lazarus' hunger even worse than the poor man's..in Hades he can only feed on the spiritual torture of unending remorse.

Our Lord and Luke love the poor and hungry like Lazarus. Our King was a poor man, and often famished. The Jews are called to treat each other not just as neighbors, but as brothers, for they are sons of Abraham. The Jews also regard health and wealth as assured signs of God's favor upon them. Many who call themselves Christians believe the same..and little else. Both peoples can become entitled to the Father's blessings without being enlightened as to the responsibilities of sonship. They can become callous from their comforts and grow contemptuous of the word of God.

Dives, as a prominent and wealthy Jew went to synagogue regularly in all likelihood. He had heard this passage from the law and the prophets many times: "For the Lord thy God blessed thee, as he promised thee..If there be among you a poor man of one of thy brethren within any of thy gates in thy land which the Lord thy God giveth thee. thou shalt not harden thy heart, nor shut thine hand from thy poor brother..but thou shalt open thy hand wide, and shall surely lend him sufficient for his need, in that which he wanted. Beware that there not be a thought in thy wicked heart..and thine eye be evil against thy poor brother, and

thou givest him nought; and he cry unto the Lord against thee, and it be sin unto thee." (from Deuteronomy 15:7-11)

With eternity in mind, it is critical to join the parable we heard in the Gospel to the words of Jesus about using wealth generously: "And so I tell you: make friends for yourself with worldly wealth, so that when it gives out, you will be welcomed in the eternal home".

Dives, the rich man, is not condemned in the end because he is rich, but because he slipped into the coma of callousness that wealth and comfort so often produces. He became consumed with his own joy, leisure and high living and failed not only to respond to the faceless mass of poor walled off beyond his gate, but chose to be blind to one poor man. His callousness had descended into contempt and made his earthly riches all that he would receive from life.

The unholy trinity of contempt are these three: to dishonor another...to hold another in disgrace...to despise or look down upon another. Lazarus, a Jewish brother, having no health and wealth, was dishonored by a brother Jew for his poverty. The rich man pegged Lazarus as a disgrace lying filthy in his palatial gateway and for his painful groans and famished cries for alms. Lazarus had been lain or thrown down there by other Jews for the sake of begging the rich man's alms. No alms came. Lazarus was despised even worse than being looked down upon, for Dives shunned him. He didn't show mercy upon this nuisance of a human being. He was not going to make friend of Lazarus.

Dives' eye had become evil, a short Hebrew idiom for contempt. The rich man had become a Jew in name only, for he had heard the word of God in the law and the prophets I quoted from Deuteronomy and chose contempt .not to give God's word room in his heart. Instead, he was comfortable to rest on the laurels of his heritage to the end of his time on earth. In short, Dives had become a nominal Jew.

Compared with the world's Christians, to say nothing of its famished peoples, we are a wealthy lot. But let me be clear: Christian people are not guilty for trying to preserve, protect and grow wealth. But this activity is fraught with danger to the soul, for it can take over their time of life to the extent that they can descend to seeing the destitute as non-persons. They elect to dishonor them in walking past them like the Levite and the priest did averting their eyes from the Samaritan, or in

our own time, in despising them in being content to leave the mass of the hungry and poor to the authorities and agencies. For them it is only, "Now, time to get on with the rest of our lives!"

You see, even good Christians can become nominal Christians. After all, as a group, the poor and needy bring so many problems along with them that we can be tempted physically and mentally to see them as a disgraceful mass. We can be tempted to wall off the sight of them behind the gates of a closed mind and heart. These persons especially loved by Jesus. Then Christian eyes have become evil with the cataracts of contempt. For by this time the needy are invisible across a chasm, beyond the reach of any willingness to love them as persons. A group out of mind takes the place of the near and needy individual. So as compassion cools by the poolside, so also the words of Jesus are thereby ignored, dishonored..and the gospel is held in contempt. Hopefully before its too late for them, they realize that they have rendered the poor man faceless, faceless as was Lazarus to Dives.

Now, on Rogation Sunday, Lazarus came to us. in the person of Courtney. She was not on death's doorstep but flagging; she was not famished, but visibly hungry; aside from her blackened feet she was not filthy and full of sores we could see. It seems that she had come from a Christian family background on the East coast just a while ago. As she briefly summarized how she came to our gate, it was apparent that she was now a dishonored daughter, a disgrace to be living any longer among family, despised enough that they could no longer even look down on her to say good-bye. Eyes of contempt led to shunning her for good, so she left their sight and came West bearing her sores within. No alms came from home to feed her. Whatever had happened, she was now hungry and without more than a stranger's gate to lean upon..our parish front door.

She asked for money to buy a few vegetables...alms...the lifeline of the needy. We raided the yellow offering box as we tried to think quickly of where she could bathe and lay her head as well. She faced no more contempt- only the immediate generosity of this parish people. Unlike the poor man Lazarus, she faced not contempt, but compassion.

Ten minutes later she came to the garden door with the money held out in her hand. She said, "The Lord told me to return it" Like Lazarus in the end, she received more than she imagined. Was she overwhelmed in becoming reacquainted with Christian love? Had she felt remorse from

some dishonesty in her story? Or was it, as one of you has fathomed, a test for St. Joseph Parish? One thing for sure, there are no nominal Christians in this house of prayer.

Do you recall who else was held in contempt by his brothers and sisters? The man who got gall for his hunger and vinegar for his thirst, whose wounds were left to bleed Him out. Shorn of all his clothing and human dignity, He hung there in disgrace; Hung there, He bore a crown of thorns of a king dishonored; taunted and spat upon, the poor man was despised by the people who looked, not down their noses, but UP upon Him. That irony is something to ponder. Contemplating eternity and the fate of Lazarus and Dives, remember how Jesus said, "You shall always have the poor with you". Jesus chooses them not only for their poor sakes, but for our wealthy sakes as well... We cannot grow in love of neighbor without them.

Blessed be the poor.

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