

I Trinity 2026

Sermon – Saint Joseph Parish

Father Craig Looney

I St. John 4.7-21 St. Luke 16.19-31

✠

Jesus told many parables...short simple stories that teach a moral or spiritual lesson. This morning's Gospel is a Rich Man - Poor Man story...about Heaven...and Hell. It is Jesus' clearest teaching that Heaven and Hell are literal, physical places...not imaginary places from a book of fables. And Heaven and Hell last forever. Where we end up...has a lot to do with how we apply the Maundy Thursday Gospel...the command to love others as much as Jesus loves us.

We use the word "love" in Church to talk about God's love for us in the unconditional sacrifice of his Son, Jesus, on the cross. In the Collect for Purity at the beginning of the Mass...we ask God to open up our hearts to the Holy Spirit so we may love him perfectly. In the Summary of the Law...the Great Commandment that summarizes all of the Ten Commandments...Jesus tells us to love God with all of our heart, soul and mind...and to love others in the same way we love ourselves.

Christian love is doing what is best for others without placing any conditions on the doing. This is unconditional love...outward reaching...compassionate...love. A major component of unconditional love is doing everything we can to make life better for those who need help. Saint James tells us in his Epistle it isn't enough to hear God's words...we must put it into practice. He tells us to take care of the widows and orphans...that means reach out to anyone who needs help.

The rich man in today's Gospel isn't given a name. He is often called *Dives* (*DEE'vez*)...Latin for a "wealthy man". The parable describes him as a man who lived in great luxury...wore expensive clothes...ate the best food money could buy...and paid no attention to the poor people who lived in the streets.

The poor man is given a name...Lazarus...the Greek form of the Hebrew name *El'azar*...meaning "God is my helper" or "God has helped". Lazarus was homeless, destitute, sick and starving. He could only hope the rich man would have pity on him and feed him table scraps. He was already an outcast from society...to make matters worse...dogs came and licked his open sores. If that makes us cringe...then we are getting the point of the parable.

God did help the poor man. The Gospel tells us the poor man died and was carried by angels to sit by Abraham's side at the feast in heaven. This was the place of supreme privilege, intimacy and honor. People attending wedding banquets coveted the seat next to the host. In John's vision...heaven is a place where "they shall hunger no more; neither thirst any more; nor shall the sun light on them nor any heat. For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them; and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters; and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes."

The rich man dies and ends up in the other place, where there is fire and he is in great pain, suffering and unquenchable thirst. But he is able to see Abraham, and Lazarus sitting at his side. He asks Abraham to help relieve his suffering by giving him some water. Abraham tells him he did nothing to relieve Lazarus suffering...and the path between heaven and hell was not a two-way street. In a final act of desperation...Dives asks Abraham to send Lazarus to his father's house, to warn his five brothers not to make the same mistakes he did. God's response: "If they haven't listened to Moses and the prophets, what makes you think they will listen to a dead person?"

Jesus expects us to reach out and help those in need in whatever way we are able. We see homelessness and poverty all around us. Help can be as simple as a kind word to a stranger, contributing time or money to a food bank, or placing our old but wearable clothes and shoes in the green containers at the local market. When we walk away from people who need our help...we are rejecting them in the same way the rich man rejected Lazarus. Refusing to love others...to do what is best for them...is the ultimate act of rejecting God's love for us.

The Rich Man - Poor Man story is about the choices we make in life to do good or to do evil....to love or to hate. The Gospel is not about God sending people to hell. The choice of going to heaven or going to hell is ultimately up to us...and it has a lot to do with how we treat others. God wants us to make the right choice to join in in heaven.

The Great Commandment to love God above all else and love our neighbor in the same way we want to be loved is the Christian imperative. It does not come with an opt-out clause. God loves us...we must love others. To love each other is to love God. To love God is to love each other. Let's make that our goal this Trinity Season...let our love for God grow...let our love for others grow...today and for the rest of our lives.

