

## A Shocking Story

Sermon for the 1<sup>st</sup> Week after Trinity

Sermon Text: Luke 16:19-31



*“There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. <sup>20</sup>And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, <sup>21</sup>who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man’s table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. <sup>22</sup>The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried, <sup>23</sup>and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. <sup>24</sup>And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and*

*send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.’ <sup>25</sup>But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. <sup>26</sup>And 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.’ <sup>27</sup>And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house – <sup>28</sup>for I have five brothers – so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.’ <sup>29</sup>But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ <sup>30</sup>And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ <sup>31</sup>He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.’”*

“Once there was a rich man...” as only the evangelist Luke can write, so simply and plainly begins a story that gets under my skin. Yes, I would even say that I have a lot of big problems with this story because alongside this rich man, Luke introduces Lazarus. Lazarus is not nameless. Contrary to the rich man, he is given a name and a dignity that the rich man does not have. But all of that was not visible in this world at first. In fact, the rich man flaunts his expensive clothing and big parties while the poor man lies before the door. The poor man has disgusting wounds and sores that even dogs came to lick away, basically not at all dignified. And with this contrast, the evangelist Luke immediately confronts us with a harsh reality that is still with us today: namely, the contrast between rich and poor. Yes, in our time, we look to the rich, the famous, the people who have done so much with their money and achievements. And the poor either don’t interest us at all or we turn our face away from them, repulsed. Most of the time we make excuses for ourselves by saying that they are at fault for falling into the gutters. When we are of this opinion, we stand in extreme contrast to the Bible. Already in the Old Testament, the poor received special dignity. Jesus also granted special dignity to the poor – it starts with the fact that He Himself was born into poor conditions and continued to live in poverty. And this tradition is linked to the New Testament letters too. Care for widows and the fatherless is especially pushed to the forefront and is one of the most important spiritual gifts. In the narrative about the rich man and poor Lazarus, all of this is painted very clearly for us. The story wants to challenge us. The story

wants to show in clear words that the roles in God's kingdom are switched. In heaven, the rich suffer and the poor receive special dignity there and may be comforted from all their earthly sufferings in Abraham's lap. I have a problem with this story because in comparison to the world population, I live here in Germany as a rich man. Through the media, I also can't miss the fact that there are many more people who live in terrible poverty. Through my use of electricity, oil, and gas, it can even be that I am directly co-responsible for the poverty of the people in the poorest countries. That is the reality that is before us and what Luke also wants to draw attention to. Don't overlook the poor! Don't ignore them! Don't look down on them! Not even those who live among us! Because they are the ones who receive special dignity in God's eyes.

The story about poor Lazarus and the rich man places us before another challenge because it very clearly shows us that we can miss out on the moment of God's grace. There can be a moment too late because the rich man is suddenly and unexpectedly taken from this life. In one blink of an eye to the next, he is catapulted from his wealth into terrible poverty. And in the blink of an eye, he finds himself in hell. That is a terrible thought. Now I know that in the past, a lot of nonsense was made with the idea of hell. Particularly in the Middle Ages, the church tried to scare people with hell so they could oppress them better. But the Bible talks surprisingly little about what all will happen in hell. The Bible is very clear about one thing. And that is that hell is a place where we are absolutely and completely separated from God. In his earthly life, the rich man could still live under the shadows of God's blessing. He saw himself as a son of Abraham. But then, this protection was suddenly ripped away and he found himself completely separated from God. That's what is so terrifying! What an awful thought – to be separated from God forever! And with these thoughts, the story about the rich man and poor Lazarus wants to challenge us. The Bible talks about a divine moment because you cannot and may not miss out on it: "Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts!" (Psalm 95:7b-8a) When we look at the rich man from our story, it becomes clear that his real sin probably wasn't just that he ignored poor Lazarus. That was probably just a part of a much greater perversity that affected him. Nor is his wealth condemned. In the entire Bible, it is never said that wealth on its own is a sin. But the sin of the rich man is found elsewhere. Only at the end do we find the answer to this question because a discussion takes place between the rich man in Hell and Abraham. The rich man, who ignored poor Lazarus throughout his life, now wants to exploit Lazarus up in heaven into doing something good for the rich man. But Abraham knows that it's impossible because there is an insurmountable chasm between heaven and hell. Finally, the rich man asks that Lazarus appear to his brothers and warn them about what is coming so that they must not suffer the same fate. Abraham's answer is interesting because it is only at this point that he shows what the rich man's real problem was. Abraham's answer is simply this: They have the Bible and if they don't believe it, then they also won't believe an angel coming from heaven. So, the rich man is not judged because of his wealth. He will not even be judged for not helping Lazarus. His selfishness is just some of the fruit from a much bigger problem and that is that he rejected God's Word. Even in hell, he still rejected God's Word because he thought that a dead man could be more persuasive than God's Word itself. As a rich man in his earthly life, he had access to all the writings of the Bible. He saw himself as a "son of Abraham." At any time, he could read the Bible. He could go to the Temple. God had spoken to him through the Word. *"If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead."* Such is the horrible result. But that's exactly the problem. This rich man didn't just ignore poor Lazarus. He also ignored God's Word. And therefore, he neither believed in God's Word nor in God Himself. Instead, he believed only in himself throughout his life. A shocking ending to a shocking story. And we can all find ourselves in it, not just because we so

often overlook the poor. The Bible shows us that faith in God and loving our neighbors belong together. Whoever believes in God opens their eyes to the needs of others. Whoever doesn't believe in God closes their heart to others. Again, another shocking outcome. But God doesn't want to scare us. Instead, He wants to shake us awake. And He wants to lead us back to the source, back to the Bible, back to God. Today, when you hear His voice, don't harden your heart. Amen.