

A Sermon for the First Sunday after Trinity Sunday, June 18, 2006
The Reverend Stephen C. Scarlett

Why should the rich man have fed Lazarus? It may seem like a silly question to ask, but it is the one we must answer if we are to understand the meaning of the story in today's gospel (Luke 16:19f.)

The story itself provides an answer. The rich man went to hell—or, more accurately, Hades. Hades is revealed in this story to be the intermediate state of the damned. It is preliminary to what Jesus called Gehenna (cf. Matthew 5:29-30, 18:9) the final state of those who do not believe.

The rich man should have fed Lazarus—and we should be concerned for the needs of those around us—in order to avoid going to an undesirable eternal destiny. The main motive in this case is fear. There are, to be sure, loftier reasons for doing what we ought to do than fear of punishment, but fear retains a necessary place. A child ought to obey his parent for love of the good, but if he has no fear of punishment, he will not be as obedient as he ought. We should obey the law because we desire what is right, but the sight of a police car does remind us that there are consequences to doing wrong.

However, in our epistle (1 John 4:7f.) St. John tells us, “Perfect love casts out fear.” As we grow in faith, fear will be replaced by the motive of love, by a genuine concern for the well-being of others.

St. John explains the motive of love for us. He writes, “Herein is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” Then St. John says, “Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another.”

This is to say that, in the first instance, we are Lazarus and God is the rich man. We were laid at his gate, diseased with sin. God saw our plight and responded to our need. He sent his Son down beyond the gate to suffer rejection at the hands of evil men and die on the cross for us. He did this in order to heal us of our sickness, bring us into his kingdom and share his wealth with us. If this is what God has done for us, we should be prepared to do the same for those we see in need around us.

If we do not have within us the impulse of love, this shows that we do not understand the gift that we receive at the altar. Jesus offered himself once for us, and Jesus communicates to us the grace of his sacrifice every time we remember his death at the altar and feed on his body and blood. As Jesus said, “Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:54). What is the proper response to this gift?

The rich man did not understand grace. He no doubt felt entitled to his wealth and thought Lazarus deserved his fate. This is an attitude that God warned Israel against in Deuteronomy saying:

Beware that you do not forget the LORD your God by not keeping His commandments... lest—*when* you have eaten and are full, and have built beautiful houses and dwell in them; and *when* your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and your gold are multiplied...when your heart is lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt...then you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth' (8:11-14).

The more we understand that all we have—life itself, that which sustains life, loving relationships, communion with God and eternal life—is a gift from God, the more we will be moved to be generous to others. The more we think that what we have is *mine*, the less generous we will be.

There is yet one more reason that the rich man should have fed Lazarus. It is the very foundation of biblical morality. Genesis 1:27 says, “God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him.” Man is made in the image of God. Thus, what we do to others we do as unto God.

This is what St. John means when he says, “He who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?” If man is made in the image of God, and if our fellow Christians are remade in the image of Christ, then we must behave toward them as we would toward God and Christ. How can we say we love Jesus if we neglect those who bear his image?

Thus, there are three reasons the rich man should have fed Lazarus and we should care for those in need around us. First, the fear of hell should move us to love. Second, God’s love for us should move us to love others. Third, the image of God in our fellow man should lead us to treat him with reverence and honor.

But love still requires an act of the will. The love that today’s lessons command is a messy business and it is always easier not to get involved. The gospel is an exhortation not to withdraw into our own comfortable world so as to cut ourselves off from the hurts and pains of the world around us.

As St. John says, “This is the commandment we have from him, That he who loves God love his brother also.”