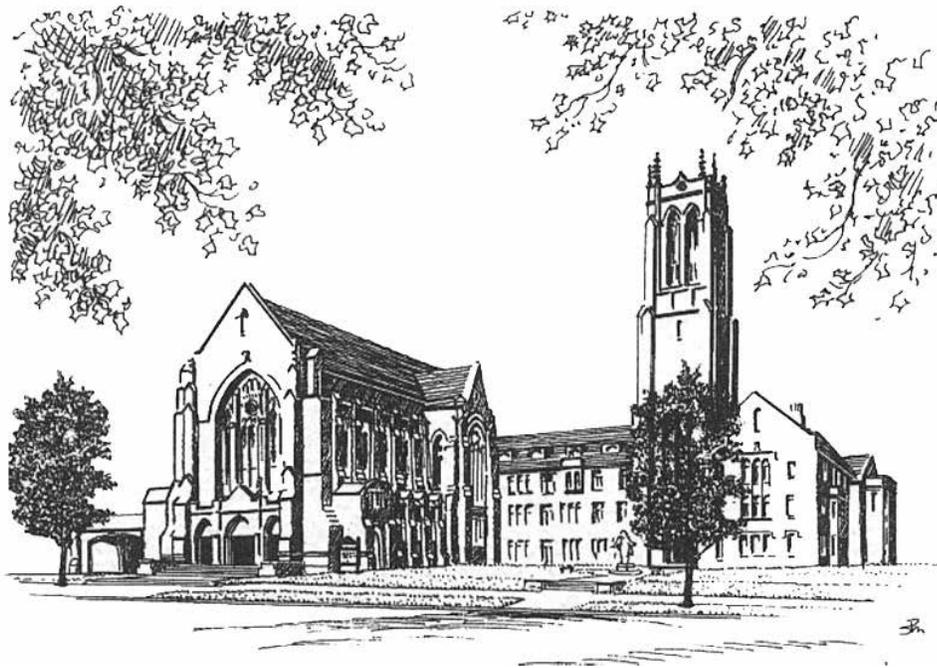


LIVING THE GOOD LIFE  
by  
Rev. Thomas A. (Tommy) Williams  
September 29, 2013  
*(Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost)*  
8:30 and 11:05 a.m.



# ST. PAUL'S

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**Texts:**

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15; Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16; 1 Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31

**Luke 16:19-31**

<sup>19</sup>*“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. <sup>20</sup>And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, <sup>21</sup>who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. <sup>22</sup>The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried.*

<sup>23</sup>*“In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. <sup>24</sup>He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’*

<sup>25</sup>*“But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. <sup>26</sup>Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’*

<sup>27</sup>*“He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house — <sup>28</sup>for I have five brothers — that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’*

<sup>29</sup>*“Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’*

<sup>30</sup>*“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 listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”*

I didn't see her at first. I was giving the benediction at the end of worship in the small town of Reklaw, Texas, one of my first churches. Reklaw is Walker spelled backwards; there was already a Walker, Texas, when they became a community founded by a man named Walker. I was the new pastor there. Something, the Holy Spirit I hope, told me to open my eyes and in my peripheral vision was a little girl of maybe eight or nine years old standing just inside the door of the sanctuary all alone. She was not a part of that congregation; we didn't know who she was, but at the close of that prayer, I met her and discovered her family outside the church. They were passing through and had a need for filling up their gas tank with fuel for their journey ahead, which the church helped them do.

It should have been hard to not notice her right there in front of us all, but we were busy praying, you understand!

A man I'll call Joe was right under our nose. Joe was a young man with addiction struggles, also afflicted with AIDS. He had suffered rejections of all kinds in his family and community. And yet he began to come to a church I was serving at the time. He was a part of the community, mind you, but we didn't really *really* see him until the day he said, "I want to be baptized."

What he said to me prior to the service that morning was, "I am sick and tired of being sick and tired. Please baptize me today." And we did. He didn't have family to stand with him. So I asked stalwart and long-time leaders in that community to be his family and stand with him that day because I knew they would say yes. And we baptized Joe that day, claimed him for God. I wish I could say that we had noticed, really noticed him before then, but I'm not sure we had.

In fact it was not we who really noticed him in the beginning. It was Joe who came to us. But, thankfully, it wasn't too late for us then, and people rose to the occasion in that church, for which I'm eternally grateful.

**You see, the prime issue at hand in Jesus' story here is that the rich man never saw Lazarus. He never really saw him.**

He passed him every day. He was sitting right at his gate. And the poor man was grateful for every crumb that dropped from this man's passing by, and he suffered a loss of dignity for it.

As the story is told, the poor man dies. And then the rich man dies. Death is the great equalizer after all. A reversal takes place, the first is now last, the last first. The poor man sits next to father Abraham at the table; the rich man is in Hades, or Sheol, the place of the dead. And there is no getting from one side to the other.

It is an ominous, even frightening, story. It is unique to Luke's recording. It's not found in the other Gospels, neither is talk of Hades. But it is here.

Although the setting of the story is about the common theme of Luke around rich and poor, the scripture never actually says that the rich man went to Hades or Sheol, the place of death because he was wealthy.

He went to Hades not because he was rich but because he passed by Lazarus every day and never saw him. Notice most importantly that the first time he ever sees Lazarus is when, from Hades "he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side."

He had allowed Lazarus to become invisible.

No doubt about it; Jesus is warning us.

I was reminded this week about some of the ways we are warned in this life. Think about those pharmaceutical commercials highlighting the latest miracle drug on the market. A child running through a meadow of flowers in bloom, a couple dancing in the kitchen, a football coach smiling into the camera. The message is all about the good life that will come to us if we take this medication. And then what happens?

We hear this warning: The side effects may be heart irregularities, you may experience nausea or headaches, not for women who are pregnant, may cause anxiety or insomnia or agitation or maybe even death... And the risk goes on, although it is said in a very soothing voice. But nonetheless, we have been warned.

This Biblical warning is not real soothing; it is more straightforward.

“It’s not what I don’t understand about the Bible that bothers me,” someone once said. “It’s what I do understand that troubles me the most!” That comment could be about today’s scripture. We don’t really want to hear about rich and poor and all of its related concerns. We would rather not see it. We would rather drive through the gate and be unbothered and let our crumbs fall from the sack as we walk by.

The irony was too great and convicting this week. For our Men’s Breakfast Lectionary Bible study we meet Wednesdays at 7 a.m. This week we were out of milk, so I drove down quickly to the corner store and bought what they had, which was several small bottles of milk.

I parked back at the church and was hurrying toward the door when I was startled to hear a passerby say “sure would be great to have one of those bottles of milk!” I was so busy walking into the gate, I mean door of the church, to talk about this scripture story, that I didn’t see him. And although I gave him a bottle, I still felt very much like the rich man in the story. Patrician, distant.

Mercy is a very important part of being a Christian disciple, but I don’t think mercy is the point of this story. It is important, it is holy, too, it is significant and must be a virtue of the Christian life. But in this story, mercy might still be construed here as a patrician’s benevolence. Often times with mercy it still allows us to keep the objects of our mercy as objects and keep at arm’s length the pain of those being served.

Giving the milk was the right thing to do, but the most important thing to do was to see this man, really seem him. And I’m not sure I did.

When we truly see someone, it causes us to see really experience the presence of Christ.

**Only in heaven, said Mother Theresa, will we understand how much we owe poorer folks for helping us to love God like we should.**

We can’t miss, dear friends, the most obvious implications of this story for our local and national life together. You and I both know there are chasms

between rich and poor and all sorts of other groups in our life together. You and I know there are gates literal and metaphorical that line our lives and our life together.

Like you, I am troubled about the possibility this week of a government shutdown. Our Congress is at an impasse to deal with a whole mix of problems jumbled together now because of failing to deal with them in the past. And so our nation will soon reach a place where we will not be able to borrow enough money to pay our bills. The deeper issue of course is that we are borrowing money to pay our bills.

Deeper than that is how we got here in the first place. The answer to that question is long and layered, and we'd have lots of opinions in this room on it.

Regardless, people in our church and community are impacted. Many federal employees will be furloughed. Some seniors and other poor folks would be impacted. It costs money to shut the government down.

But this is not new. The truth is that money is the presenting issue for the deeper problem illustrated in our parable — he never saw him and thus even though Lazarus was at his gate, he might as well have been a mile away.

Our lives are inextricably linked. I have a stake in your well being and you in mine.

Many are fascinated with Pope Francis these days and for good reason. He is something of an enigmatic figure. Aside from media fascination with him, I am most struck by his tone and priority as being focused on the dignity and personhood of each other. This personalism if you will is among the most radical implications of the Christian faith.

One columnist last week described this Christian world view this way: “in every way that matters to God, human beings are completely equal and completely loved. They can't be reduced to ethical object lessons. Their dignity runs deeper than their failures. They matter more than any cause; they are the cause.”

It seems to me that the point for our Gospel lesson is just this. The cause to be championed is not the abstract issue of poverty and income disparity in America; the cause is Lazarus himself. The cause is not global hunger and food insecurity per se; the cause to be lifted up is first our cousins, our friends, the woman on the street who we might meet.

To extend it a bit: the cause to be championed is the struggling teenager in your home, the aging parent or grandparent looking wondering why they are still alive or wondering why they are dying. The cause so to speak is not first the issue but the person and the person leads to the cause, which collectively leads us to broad-based solutions. I hope you see what I mean. This is the Christian point of view I see here in this story from Luke.

If we begin with abstractions, it becomes yet another way of seeing life in terms of issues and not real people.

One friend of mine says it in theological terms: The incarnation is a definitive doctrine on the side of personalism. The challenge for the church universal is not relevance but distance. It is not relevance with the culture it is distance from it. Distance from the poor, from pain, from the ache of every human heart.

That is where the gospel can speak and with power. The church doesn't have to get cooler and more hip. We don't have to be more contemporary or more traditional per se, but deeper and more faithful, seeing more clearly.

The church is at its best when we do a whole lot of loving, listening and showing up where things are messy and broken. We Christians are a group of people that confess that God actually showed up in and as a person.

Generic notions of rightness and good don't hang together very long in the face of this world's pain. This is why Jesus himself is the foundation of our faith. God has not only marked out the outlines of life well lived and properly oriented. God has put on feet and walked it.

And so then what matters in our national life together is not how we got to where we are and lamenting and pointing fingers, but while we have the chance, how might we bridge the chasm in this life?

What matters in our story then is not how the rich man got wealthy or how the poor man became poor, but that they see each other and know the God that made them both.

It is because of the love of Jesus Christ and his closeness to the human condition that the great chasm can be crossed and reconciled.

The good news is there is time in this life to bridge the chasm. It isn't dependent on whether the Congress can do their work or even whether the church always gets it right. What matters are the people we encounter and the love we show one another.

**In this sort of life, we find what the good life is all about.**

I hope I'll never forget it. I was serving communion from one end of the rail to another when I was just ahead of a young family, about to serve them. They were clearly a family who had known struggles. It was in their faces, in their expressions, in their body language. This family perhaps had been on the very margin of society, in and out of homelessness, I thought as I came near them with the bread of Jesus. I'll never forget the whisper of the little boy to his mother and father when I said "the body of Christ given for you" to one kneeled just before them. And the whispered question of the little boy to his parents was, "Even for us mama?" "Yes," his mother said, "for us too." "Even me?" the boy said. "Yes son, even you."

The truth is, we are that little boy, we are Lazarus, too. You are worth noticing and seeing and valuing. And through Jesus, God has reached across a great chasm and reversed the fortunes of those who would seem to be forgotten.

And with eyes of love, God sees all of us. You and me, Rich and poor...and offers life.

**Now is the time to notice.**

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.