

Trinity 1 - Luke 16:19-31

God isn't an imaginary friend. You can't say you love God if you hate and despise what he has given you. What has he given you? He has given you his Word, and he has given you your neighbor.

Jesus says to his disciples, if you love me, then you will keep my Word. We can't know God apart from what he says in his Word. Apart from what he has commanded, apart from what his Son has fulfilled, apart from what he has promised, we cannot claim to know him. Much less can we claim to love him!

In the same way, St. John says that if you say you love God and hate your brother, then you are a liar. How can you love God whom you cannot see if you hate your brother whom you can see?

Love isn't easy. Love is hard. It believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. It patiently puts up with flawed, helpless, annoying, rude, and ungrateful people. But love does this because of its source. Love flows from a heart that is cleansed from sin by faith. Faith receives the full forgiveness and loving kindness of God in Jesus Christ. Faith lays hold of the promise of eternal life. Faith has confidence that nothing can separate us from God's love. So love flows freely from faith. Love is therefore not tormented by the doubts and uncertainties of this sinful life. Love doesn't worry about losing, about being cheated, about being unloved. Because love is grounded on the certainty faith always enjoys.

The rich man in Jesus' parable had no love, because he had no faith. But we don't hear about his lack of faith until he's already suffering in hell. There we hear how he can't rely on the Word of God. He shows concern for his brothers. You could call it a natural affection. He doesn't want them to end up with the same fate. But when Abraham tells him that they have Moses and the Prophets, he refuses to accept that as an answer. They need something more than God's Word, so he thinks.

This is why the rich man couldn't love. He couldn't believe. He couldn't trust the promise of the prophets that the Christ would die for our sins and on the third day rise from the dead. His utter absence of faith showed by his utter lack of love for his brother Lazarus. Lazarus had spent his days right outside the rich man's house. The rich man knew his name. But he loved his own life and the pleasures of this world too much to pay any attention to Lazarus. He therefore kept Lazarus at a distance.

The rich man didn't necessarily do anything actively bad to Lazarus. He didn't send people to shoo him away from his gate. It's just that he didn't care about him. And that's the point. That's what is so tragic about this rich man's fate.

You see, Lazarus was in fact very wealthy. We don't see it until he's in heaven. But this was a man who was helped by God, as his name implies. His help was in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth. The fact that he was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom was proof that he took comfort in the same promise of the Savior whom Abraham trusted. It's all the comfort he had. As he died poor and sick and hungry, with nothing but dogs to give him medical treatment, all Lazarus had was the promise of Christ proclaimed by the prophets.

So here is the great tragedy. Had the rich man taken the time to go out and visit with Lazarus, he would have found a great treasure. Of course, he should have invited Lazarus in and shared his earthly goods with him. But even if he had simply taken a moment to talk with him, commune with him as a friend, the rich man would have realized that he was in fact very poor in comparison to Lazarus. Compared to the wealth that faith has in Christ, our lives on earth are

very much impoverished. The rich man therefore would have learned to love Lazarus, not merely as a charity case, but as a brother who confesses the same truth and looks forward to the same inheritance. But sadly, he saw Lazarus from a distance. So now he sees Lazarus from an even farther distance, sitting in the bosom of Abraham as he himself is tormented in hell.

Love is not an idea. Love is the action of faith. Jesus is teaching us about brotherly love, Christian love, the love that binds us together in perfect harmony. Of course, we should do good to all people. But especially to those of the household of faith. When we forget that our fellow redeemed share a treasure more valuable than heaven and earth put together, then we lose sight of what our faith rests in. We then forget how to love. Instead, we get misled into some fantasy of love, dreaming about getting the approval of the world instead.

This happens to churches all the time. Folks get excited about outreach and bringing people into the church. But in all the excitement, they forget about their first love. In all their excitement, they forget about the foundation laid by the Scriptures. They begin to water down the richness of God's Word, because they are afraid it might offend or turn people off. Some people don't want to believe that baptism saves, so they just don't teach about that. Some people don't like what the Bible teaches about marriage, chastity, and the roles of husbands, wives, fathers, mothers, and those with and under authority. So they steer clear of those issues too. They can't expect people to learn all this doctrine. So they just tell them that Jesus loves them, giving them an easy-to-swallow message of peace and joy. But they don't allow people to grow and strengthen their roots.

Sadly, they end up destroying the roots of their own members. As they water down the doctrine of Scripture, their own children suffer for it. They become malnourished, not learning to grow in the knowledge of Christ. Their weaker brethren suffer for it as well. What was once a place where God's Word was taught in its truth and purity eventually becomes a place to entertain the masses. And in all that desire to reach out to everyone out there, they neglect to care for the people right in their midst. This is the deceit of lust for worldly pleasure. It can take the most noble and holy thing, like a desire to spread the gospel, and turn it into something that is just self-promoting and cold.

So consider what your first love is. Why do you gather here this morning and every Sunday morning? Isn't it because you know that you need the one thing needful? You need the Word of Christ who loved you and gave his life up for you. You need the promise of his baptism, which washes you clean from sin. You need his body and blood, which is a sure token of his favor. You need the company of the saints who confess this saving truth.

This is why we hold to the whole Word of our Savior. Because this is how we know God's love for us. It is in his precious doctrine of salvation. It is in the confession of the Triune God and the atoning work of Christ. It is in his holy Word and sacraments. The gospel of our Savior who loved us and gave himself up for us is the greatest treasure we have. It is so simple and pure that even a child can confess it. Jesus Christ, God's Son, has died for me, and by his resurrection he gives me a new life. But it is also so rich that we will never touch the bottom. Whether we are pondering the great mystery that God became flesh and made atonement for the sin of the world, or we are meditating on the promises given in baptism, the body and blood of Christ, and in the absolution, or whether we are learning how God calls us each to love those in our various stations in life, the wealth of wisdom and comfort continues to overflow from the wells of God's living Word.

When we see this as our greatest treasure and trust in these words of eternal life, then we also grow to love one another, however poor or seemingly insignificant to this world. This is the love that binds the members of the church together, because Christ's Word binds us to him.

The rich man cared about his brothers. But such care was not driven by a trust in the Word of God. He thought that if they would see something amazing, like Lazarus risen from the dead, then they would believe. But he was a fool. His unbelief blinded him from true and lasting love and fellowship. And all he was left with was a false idea, a dream that could never come true.

It's easy to think that you love people if you don't have to spend time with them. If you only keep them at a distance, then at least you can just imagine they have the best of traits, that they would never annoy you, and that they would always be thankful for any act of kindness from you.

But God didn't love us from a distance. He didn't look at us as some possibility, like a scout for a football team. His affection for us wasn't some fantastic idea, like a boy who sees a girl from far away, gets twitterpated, and keeps wondering what she's up to. No, God's love for us is one that swooped down into the lowest parts of the earth. The Son of God, who was always equal with the Father, became a man. He was born, not in a palace to a royal queen, but outside an inn to a poor virgin. He himself didn't know any sin of his own, yet he became acquainted with the misery of our sin. He knows the very depth of our sin intimately, yet he bore it in his own body. Now that is love!

The rich man was wrong, not because he wanted Lazarus to help him, but because he didn't see what made Lazarus so wealthy. Even in hell, he still couldn't recognize it. Lazarus had Moses and the prophets. Lazarus had the faith of Abraham. He had the promise of Christ. This is our greatest inheritance. So when we share this Word together – when we gather with Lazarus – then we are wealthier beyond all measure. We aren't imagining anything when we learn to confess the truth of the gospel together. Then we learn to love one another as our Lord has loved us. Because we have what mammon and all earthly treasures can never buy. We have Christ, his Word, and his Christians. There is nothing more precious than that. Amen.