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Pentecost 19

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
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“The True Reality”
Text: Luke 16:19-31

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Appearances are often deceiving. The Holy Gospel for this day presents a perfect example of that. By all accounts and appearances, the rich man in this story was “blessed.” He had all that he needed, everything he wanted, and was probably looked up to by all in the community. He must have been doing something *right* to have been rewarded so handsomely by God. . . . On the other hand, there was Lazarus. By all accounts and appearances he was “cursed.” Homeless, in poor health, hungry, and dumped in the street. His only companions the dogs who came and licked his sores. Surely, he must have done something terribly *wrong* to have been punished so severely by God.

But appearances are deceiving. For, as Jesus tells us, we have it exactly backwards and upside down! The man who by all accounts and appearances we thought blessed was actually the cursed one, and the man who we thought cursed was actually the blessed one! . . . So how do we know? How do we know when we look around in our world? Who is blessed and who is cursed? How do we know when we look at ourselves? Is God pleased with me or is God angry with me? How do we know if what our eyes tell us could be so completely wrong?

We know by our ears. The Word of God will always tell us the truth and the way things are – despite appearances; despite what our thoughts or emotions might tell us; despite the opinions of those around us. The Word of God says who we are, and we are as He says. The only question is whether we will believe what the Word of God says or not.

Now don't discount that last question: whether we will believe what the Word of God says or not. Because the appearances of things in this world and the opinions of this world are very powerful and influential. And we do believe them. We *want* to believe them, because they tend to make sense. The rich are blessed, the poor are cursed. Good is rewarded, bad is punished. Therefore we can judge a person based upon what is happening to him. We get what we deserve and we deserve what we get. And so when I

win the lottery God is blessing me, and when I am diagnosed with cancer God is punishing me. God answers my prayers when I'm good and doesn't when I'm bad. Therefore if I get better things will go better. Success equals blessing and blessing equals success. Blessed are the blessed because they have been blessed; and cursed are the cursed because they have been cursed.

But there is only one word for that kind of thinking: *sinful*. For it puts God into our categories. It is conforming God's ways to our ways, and God's thinking to our thinking. It is conforming God to our image. If this is how things work with us, then it must be how things work with God as well. And we have successfully put God into a nice little box where we've got Him all figured out and know how to get what we want out of Him.

But not so! Not so, Jesus is telling us today. God is not so easily tamed and figured out. His thoughts are higher than our thoughts and His ways higher than our ways. (Is 55:8-9) And so if we want to know God and who He is and what He thinks of us, we will not find this out through our eyes – by what appears to be success or punishment, blessing or curse, goodness or sin, happiness or sorrow. We will know it only by listening to Him. For appearances are deceiving, but the Word of God is true and sure and stands forever. ***“They have Moses and the prophets,”*** Jesus said, ***“let them listen to them.”***

So are you listening?

Lazarus had nothing in this world, and what he did have was pitiful and poor. And yet God's Word tells us that in this story, Lazarus was really the rich man! For God's blessing does not solely lie in the things of this world that come and go. No, the blessing of God that we have received is the gift of faith, which makes us children of God and inheritors of the Kingdom of God. This is a treasure that cannot be taken away from us. A treasure that Lazarus received not for a while, but for eternity.

Lazarus longs to be fed with the crumbs that fall from the rich man's table. He is skin and bones, wasting away to the eyes of the world. But the Word of God tells us that in this story, Lazarus was truly the one who was well fed! For he lived on the living bread that comes down from above, the Word that comes from the mouth of God. With this he is filled and satisfied, while it was the other man who was starving and wasting away. Lazarus received a food that is not digested and passed away, but which nourishes unto eternal life.

Lazarus does not have clothes that can cover his body. The dogs have no problem coming to him and licking his sores. The eyes of this world see a man exposed and humiliated. Yet God's Word tells us that in this story, Lazarus is the one who was dressed

in royal robes! The royal robes of Christ, his Saviour. He is the son whose Father put the finest robe on him, the ring on his hand, and the shoes on his feet. It is, in reality, the well-dressed man who is dressed in rags. The other man whose fancy and expensive clothes offer him no protection or comfort from the flames of hell.

Yet none of this can be seen with the eye. It can only be seen with the eyes of faith. The eyes of faith which look past the appearance and opinions of the world, and believes that the Word of God says who we are, and we are as He says. All of which is to say that as long as we are in this world, the Church will be hidden, and her saints unknown.

Now that is terribly frustrating, isn't it? Terribly frustrating, for doesn't it seem as if the Church should be grand and glorious so that all will want to come to her? So that all will desire Christ and be saved? But it *was* once that way, in the beginning, in the Garden. A more perfect place there could not have been. And yet we did not desire God and His Word. No, that kind of thinking is again conforming God to *our* image, to *our* picture of success, and His ways to *our* ways. No, as long as Christ and His Church are on earth, they will be hidden. Hidden under humility. Hidden under suffering.

For so it was when the Son of God Himself descended from His royal throne and took His place with all of us Lazaruses. He came and was born in a barn, with nowhere to lay His head, and to be surrounded by dogs (Ps 22:16). He came and was despised and considered as refuse. He came and hungered and thirsted, was beaten and whipped, and hung as a cursed man on a cross. He was sold and abandoned by those He considered His friends. He was dumped and considered worthless. His Father even forsakes Him and turns His back on Him. . . . But eyes do not tell the story of what happened there. Only faith can see that the divinity which was once hidden under human flesh was soon revealed in the power and victory of the resurrection. That which Jesus accomplished for you under the cover of dereliction and shame now is proclaimed openly for the forgiveness of your sins. And the weakness and shame of Christ are now our glory, for we know that this was done for us and for our salvation.

And so like Lazarus – like Christ! – what we are now is nothing at all like what we shall be. Those who look at the Church today see a Church ridiculed by the world, covered with shame, torn by scandal, divided amongst itself, suffering and struggling. A Lazarus amongst the cities and buildings of success and capitalism and wealth. Those who look at you as Christians, as children of God, see people who struggle with sin and doubt, who do not have perfect lives – Lazaruses amongst the “beautiful people.” . . . But if you could only see yourselves through God's eyes! He sees none of the sin and shame and humiliation – but only the beautiful, perfect bride of His Son. The bride the Son, our Saviour, washed clean by His blood, and laid down His life for ours. As a groom is

breathless at the sight of His bride, so does Christ look at you. And so He has given you all that He has and all that He is. His sonship given to you in Holy Baptism. His body and blood given to you in Holy Communion. His Spirit given to you to bring you to Him. His forgiveness, life, and kingdom, all yours. And the wedding feast of Heaven now awaits us, to be given on the day when, like Lazarus, the angels will come for us and carry us home.

But, of course, we are not there yet! Not now. For now we live by faith. Faith that does not say “I can *see* the Holy Christian Church,” or “I can *feel* the forgiveness of sins.” But faith which confesses “I *believe* in the Holy Christian Church . . . I *believe* in the forgiveness of sins.” I can prove none of this to anyone else, especially by the way I live and what others see of me. But I am who God says I am, and I am as He says. I am His child, a member of the Church, the Bride of His Son. I am here washed clean and forgiven, fed by His body and blood, and given His blessing. And while all of this is hidden under words and water and bread and wine, and humility and shame and smallness and suffering . . . while we may look to all the world like a Lazarus, I know it is not so. For blessed are the poor in spirit; blessed are the meek; blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness; blessed are the pure in heart; blessed are those who are persecuted; blessed are those who hear the Word of God and keep it, guard it, cling to it. And to this Word – and not the things of this world; to this Word I, like Lazarus, will cling!

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

(Thanks to Rev. Chad Bird and Rev. Erik Rottmann for some of the thoughts and phrases contained in this sermon.)