



September 25, 2022

Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

As Christians we believe in heaven and hell. But it is not that often that we stop to understand them. Heaven is the easier of the two. Heaven gives us a certain sense that if we believe in the loving and caring God who guides us in this life, then that same God would extend life and joy after death in the Kingdom. Hell is a more awkward issue. How can we explain that a loving and forgiving God who condemns his creatures to eternal torment? Is not God all merciful and all forgiving? Then how can we explain eternal damnation? Well, we must look closer at ourselves and the way we prepare for death. It is an honest question, and one on which today's gospel can shed some light.

Today's story of the rich man and Lazarus is one of the few times in the New Testament when we are given a glimpse of the afterlife. What we see is instructive and enlightening. The thing to notice in the story is that the rich man never changes. While he is alive, he is completely absorbed in himself, in his purple clothing, his fine linen, and sumptuous dinners. After death he is the same way. Even though he is in torment, what he is most concerned about is securing a drop of water to cool his tongue. It is all about him, from the beginning to the end, in this world and in the next. What this story is telling us is that if you are filled up with yourself, if you are completely self-absorbed, then there is no room for God's love. If there is no room for love, then there is no room for heaven either. Complete selfishness is the characteristic of hell.

That great chasm in the story today, that the rich man cannot cross and that people from the other side cannot cross has not been put there by Abraham. It has not been put there by God. That great chasm has been established by the rich man, himself. It represents the distance we can put between ourselves and God when we only think about ourselves. The rich man's heart is so closed in on himself that he can neither give nor receive love and mercy. He wants to be happy. He sees happiness far off, but the darkness and depth for his self-love has caused boundless distance from heavenly peace. He does not understand that his condemnation is the result of his own selfishness. His torment results from an abyss he has created through the choices he made while alive.

The lesson, Jesus teaches us in this story is to warn us, to remind us of the choices we make today will have eternal consequences. By the way we act today, in the now, is shaping the person we will be for all eternity. Whenever we make choices to spend our time and energy only on ourselves, we increase our self-centeredness. When we fill our minds with obsessions about how we look, what we have or what other people think about us; when we waste time surfing the internet or viewing pornography; when we make decisions that are based only upon our own comfort and pleasure; when we want it our way only; with each one of those decisions our heart closes in a bit more on itself and we become bitter and hard-hearted. We then lose our place in heaven and the love and mercy of God. Our redemption on the other hand is when we open ourselves to service, when we reach out to help our children, our friends, our neighbors, when we give of what we have to those in need or are willing to stand up and defend those whose freedom is endangered; through that generosity and service, our heart opens a bit more to love, and God finds favor in our actions.

The rich man's heart was so full of himself that he could not accept mercy and love. A glass that is already full cannot receive anything more. The pleasure of heaven is that we will be able to enjoy God's presence and God's glory. Jesus gave us an invitation to heaven, by his death it was offered to every creature at every time and season in life. God cannot be blamed if we so fill our hearts with ourselves that we cannot receive what God offers. God does not send anyone to eternal torment. By our free will, we can choose to go there on our own. The choices we make today will determine how much room we will have in our own hearts to accept love. Jesus tells us to choose carefully. Because if we become so filled up with ourselves. We will have no room for kindness, forgiveness or mercy, and God will have no choice but to keep his love distant. If we allow ourselves to be like the rich man, then that would not only be a disaster in life journey but lead us to hell.