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Pentecost XVI & Proper 21
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Text: Luke 16:19 – 31
Title: A Christian Carol

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Although he was fairly well-known before it all happened, his experiences on that fateful night made him nothing less than famous. Prior to that night, he was an undisputed success in business. No one doubted his abilities in the financial world, and everyone knew that he was utterly ruthless when it came right down to it. All of his competitors were well aware of the challenge that he proposed to their own work, and even though they feared his aggressive business style, they also had a great deal of respect for his ability.

The day that he became famous had started out like any other typical day. He had gotten up and gone to work. His subordinate, Bob, had done his work in a satisfactory way, but he had been fairly annoying in asking for an improved benefit. Then Bob almost crossed the line by daring to ask for tomorrow off. What nerve! The only reason that he had decided to allow it was to stop his whining about wanting time off to spend with his wife and children, as though family were more important than making money!

When his time at the office was finally over, he made his way back to his home. The weather was just as cold as it should be, and he was looking forward to getting home to a nice warm fire and his typically simple supper. As he walked through the streets, he noticed with contempt the worthless dregs of humanity that only seemed able to seek a handout from honest, hard-working men such as him. And while they were an annoyance to him, he also knew that they wouldn't bother him. The word had spread among all of them that his wrath wasn't worth suffering, and that he wasn't enough of a push-over to give any of them a single penny.

After his normal stroll, he finally reached his home, and as he went to put his key into the lock something seemed strange. For the briefest of moments his mind almost imagined a face on the door, and he almost thought he heard someone call his name. It was enough to make him take a step back and look around to see who was playing a game with him. There was no one there, and when he looked back at the door everything was normal again.

So, he opened the door and went inside. Normally, he would have gone right up his stairs to prepare his food and get ready for bed, but something inside of him made a search of the rooms a priority instead. Completely out of character for him, he lit a lamp to conduct a proper search. When he didn't find anything out of the ordinary, he realized how foolish he was being, and decided to continue with his typical evening routine. He stoked the fire to help heat things up a little more, and then he changed into his bed-clothes and sat down before the fireplace to eat his bread and cheese.

That's when everything really began to take a completely unexpected turn. The little bell that was on the wall suddenly began to ring. There wasn't even a draft to make it move, but the sound was unmistakable. He looked over at it, and then he saw the glow. It was coming from outside the room that he was in, and he knew that there were no lamps lit anywhere else because he had already searched all of the rooms. Then, the clinking sound began, and he could feel his heart begin to race with the fear of the unknown. Try as he might, he couldn't take his eyes away from that glow, and suddenly, there he was. His dead partner, Jacob Marley, entered into his room, and Scrooge was utterly and truly terrified for the first time in his life.

A Christmas Carol, the famous story of Charles Dickens, has been around since 1843, and it has been told in so many different ways that the original story is sometimes hard to find in all of the artistic license that has been taken. But the basic elements of the story remain the

same. Ebenezer Scrooge is a very rich man who has no compassion or generosity for the poor, and his partner, Jacob Marley, comes back from the dead to warn him that he must change his ways or be eternally punished. Of course, by the end of his experience with the three spirits who are sent to him on Christmas Eve night, Scrooge is a completely changed man who now understands what Christmas is all about, at least as far as Mr. Dickens was concerned.

I know that this sounds like the beginnings of a Christmas sermon, but the point is really about the spirits that are sent to warn Scrooge about the punishment that awaits him. They are able to convince him that he must change his ways or he is doomed. The similarity between this famous story and the parable of today's Gospel lesson is striking enough that I have to wonder if Charles Dickens was inspired by this particular parable from Luke 16. In it Jesus talks about a rich man who has no compassion, generosity, or mercy for the poor man who is right in front of him, just like Scrooge. The parable also has a profound difference with the classic novel, and that is the lack of spirits sent to warn the living about what awaits them. Father Abraham makes it clear, there will be no spirits sent to the living. The living must listen to the warnings from the Lord that are already in place.

This week's parable is told by Jesus as a warning to the Pharisees who are called "lovers of money" in verse 14 of this same chapter in Luke. It was generally understood by the people of the day that someone who was rich must be in God's favor because of the blessings that they so obviously enjoyed. The idea that a man as rich as the one in the parable would not end up in heaven was pretty absurd to those who listened to it, but Jesus is making the point that even though a person appears rich here on earth, that doesn't necessarily mean that they are rich in heaven, that is rich in faith.

The rich man is described in a few different ways that provide some details about his character, or lack of it. The first point, and it may not seem like a big deal, is that the rich man is never named, but the poor man, Lazarus, is. That contrast shows us how unimportant the rich man is even though he was highly privileged while he lived. By not giving him a name, Jesus is showing that he didn't really live a life that mattered to anyone but maybe himself. He is described as "feasting sumptuously" everyday and being dressed in purple and fine linen. In other words, he lived excessively and only dressed in the most expensive garments that there were. Purple was always expensive in those days because the dye had to come from a rare shellfish, so it wasn't very easy to make or to purchase. Finally, the poor man, Lazarus, stayed right outside of his gates, and even though he must have noticed him in his comings and goings, the rich man never showed him any mercy or gave him any help. Lazarus was left to wallow in misery right there in front of his presumably lavish home.

The type of person that the rich man is comes into even greater clarity when he has his conversation with Abraham. As he suffers in eternal torment, the rich man sees Abraham with Lazarus in heaven. He has been carried to heaven by angels, but the rich man asks for Abraham to have Lazarus serve him by relieving his pain with a little water on his tongue. Even while he is suffering in hell, the rich man still doesn't see Lazarus as worthy of anything but serving him. When that relief is denied him, he asks for Lazarus to go to his brothers to warn them of the torment that is waiting. Abraham says that they have Moses and the prophets, and if they refuse to listen to them, then they won't even pay attention to someone rising from the dead. There will be no special warnings, they must listen to the Word of God and nothing else.

Ignoring the needs of Lazarus shows that the rich man had no faith to motivate him to have compassion or mercy. He was completely in love with his own money and position, and he

refused to acknowledge that God's Word had any meaning for him. The Old Testament already contained accounts of resurrections, and he didn't acknowledge them, neither would his brothers.

Jesus never says that being rich is a sin in and of itself. What He is concerned with – as we've seen in several recent Gospel readings – is how to properly use the possessions that God has blessed you with, and He calls you to use your gifts in service to others by showing compassion to those who need it. When we ignore the needs of those around us, we are guilty of living the same life that the rich man did, and we ignore His Word and its calls for repentance.

But even though the rich man is left with no hope at the end of the parable, we are given that hope. The resurrection of the dead is given a foreshadowing at the end of the parable as Abraham's words acknowledge the possibility of such a miracle. Jesus knows that He will rise from the grave as He is telling this parable, and through faith we know that He has already risen from the dead to defeat death. His resurrection from the dead guarantees that you will also rise from the dead on the Last Day, and it will be a resurrection to everlasting life, not a temporary one like the real Lazarus experienced in the Gospel of John.

When that day comes the Lord will return for the final judgment. He will separate out the unfaithful, merciless people who mirror the attitudes of the rich man and the Pharisees just like an old Scrooge, and they will be sent to the eternal torment that the parable describes. The faithful will be raised to everlasting life with father Abraham and all of the saints. Just like they showed mercy to those around them in this life, they will also receive mercy from the Lord God who for the sake of His Son, Jesus, is capable of mercy far beyond what we can even begin to imagine. Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.