

The Man Who Listened

Luke 16:19-31

The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 25, 2016

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Broadlands

There once was a rich man. He owned several homes. He collected cars. He had the finest in clothing. He was married and had several children.

His wife became ill with cancer. She began treatments. She underwent surgery. Like many cancers the surgery helped for a while and then the cancer came back. The treatments worked for a while and the cancer came back. After battling this for many years the rich man's wife died.

The rich man was unprepared for the loss. He did not know how much it would affect him. He missed his wife terribly. He realized how important she was to him. He took on a fuller understanding of how important his children were to him. And he understood better the importance of life and of living it well.

The rich man established a foundation. The foundation was designed to fund certain cancer research so that cures could be found for cancers like the one that took his wife's life and other similar cancers. The rich man funded the foundation out of his own money while of course accepting donations from others who wanted to contribute to the fight against cancer.

Desiring to see the results of his foundation's work the rich man went to the clinics and hospitals and research centers that his foundation supported. He talked to the doctors and other specialists to see what their needs were in order to advance the research. He fronted even more money to the fight against cancer. Gradually the rich man stopped going on expensive vacations. He visited his children and grandchildren regularly and gave them gifts and that was the extent of his personal splurges. Eventually he quit collecting cars. Eventually he sold one of his houses. He was so interested in helping others with his money that he spent most of his time either about his business by which he had made his fortune or with the work that his foundation was doing to help those who were sick and suffering.

Eventually the rich man got cancer himself. It was not identical to the cancer that took his wife's life, but it was cancer. He too had to undergo surgery. He too had to undergo treatments. Like his wife the surgery worked for a while and the cancer came back. Like his wife the treatments worked for a while, but the cancer came back. While the treatments could slow the progress of the cancer, they could not stop it.

As death approached the rich man had regrets. He regretted that he had not spent more time with his wife while they were living. He regretted that he had not spent more time with his children and grandchildren even though after the death of his wife and the establishment of his foundation he did see them a lot. He felt that he could have seen them more. He regretted that he had not supported his own foundation better than he had. He regretted it not because he himself was dying of cancer and his foundation helped to support the facilities in which he was receiving his care. He regretted not supporting his foundation better because he had met hundreds of other people suffering from cancer that would also die. He knew that he could have done more to alleviate their suffering. He knew that he could have accomplished more to take away their pain. He could have sold his houses. He did not need all of them. In fact he could have sold his main residence and resided in something much more modest. He did not need to keep that house. Think of the proceeds that would have come from those sales. If only he had thought of it while he was living! Think of the people who had died because he had hung on to those houses. Think of the proceeds that could have gone to his foundation just from the savings on insurance and taxes if he had sold those houses. But he had gotten wrapped up in his wealth and did not notice it

when it could have gone to help others. It took his own death to call his attention to the neglect that had permeated his life.

He could have sold his car collection. When he had stopped buying cars for his collection he thought that he was making a big sacrifice. Anytime he had thought about buying a new car, he put the proceeds to his foundation. But honestly he thought to himself he could have sold the car collection. It would have made a handsome gift to help others. Think of the people that may not be dead had he sold that collection! Think of the people who might have survived had the researchers just had that extra \$500 000 or \$600 000.

He could have done more. The rich man lay on his death and bed and knew that he stood before God. He lamented before God the failures of his life. He lamented before God the poverty of his life. He knew that there were people far less wealthy than he was in material terms who had led far more wealthier and fulfilled lives than he had done. He knew that his own selfishness had inhibited his generosity. He knew that it was literally killing him. Because who knows? Perhaps if he had donated more the researches would have found the cure for the cancer that was taking his life. But the rich man knew that is the way that it was with sin. If it were not cancer, his sins would have found some other way of putting him to death.

The rich man knew that if he were to enter into everlasting life after his death it would have to be by the mercy of His Lord Jesus Christ. There was no other hope for him. The reason that the rich man had come to this conclusion was because he had listened to Moses and the prophets. More than that His Lord Jesus Christ had risen from the dead in fulfillment of Moses and the prophets. More than that the apostles had born witness to the resurrection of Jesus in the New Testament. More than that the apostles had proclaimed in the Scriptures the significance of the resurrection of Jesus not only for Jesus but also for all of us. The rich man had listened to these things and that is why he lamented his sins and so when he died the angels of God carried him to the bosom of Abraham.

Now that I have given it to you in a parable, let me give it to you straight.

It would be easy to conclude from our Lord's parable that the rich go to hell and that the poor go to the bosom of Abraham. After all when the rich man shouts from hell to Abraham, Abraham tells him that in life he had received his good things and now is in torment while Lazarus had received his bad things and was now comforted. But when the rich man brings up the subject of his five brothers Abraham does not tell the rich man that his brothers need to repent of their wealth. Rather he tells the rich man that his brothers must listen to Moses and the prophets. Without regard to their wealth if they listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not go to the place of torment.

Once you know how the parable ends it is easy to go back and see where the rich man went astray. Lazarus was laid at the gate of the rich man because that was common practice in the ancient world. There was no public system for caring for such people in ancient times. Often times the community would take the most severely sick and put them in front of the homes of wealthy members of the community simply because there was nowhere else to take them and no one else who could provide for their care. It was then expected that the wealthy person would care for the sick. This rich man did not do that. In spite of the fact that his clothing and his home proclaimed that he had the wealth to do so, he ignored Lazarus who it sounds like was the only sick person at his gate, but at least the dogs came and licked his sores. The unclean dogs were kinder to Lazarus than the rich man.

Then once the rich man is in hell he isn't any better. When he looks up to Abraham's bosom and sees that Lazarus is there, he does not directly ask Lazarus to help him cool his tongue. If the rich man can talk to Abraham the rich man can certainly talk to Lazarus too. Why ask Abraham to send Lazarus to

dip the end of his finger in water to cool his tongue? Why not simply appeal to Lazarus himself to dip his finger in water and cool the rich man's tongue? Well, I suppose that it could be that the rich man now regrets his past treatment of Lazarus in life, but it is now too late to do anything about it. While that could be it is just as likely that even in hell the rich man still views Lazarus as a second class person who should be serving the rich man. In the eyes of the rich man Lazarus does even rank being spoken to. Instead the rich man tells Abraham to tell Lazarus to come and dip his finger in water to cool the rich man's tongue. Lazarus is apparently good only for helping the people in flame. And this is in spite of the fact that the rich man knows that he is in hell! He still believes that he is better than Lazarus even though Lazarus is in Abraham's bosom. Oh yes. Hell is filled with people who think that there has been some kind of mistake. Even there they do not repent. If the rich man had listened to Moses and the prophets he would have repented. His five brothers have Moses and the prophets. Let them listen to them.

Now you have the advantage of the rich man. You not only have Moses and the prophets, you have the apostles. Since our Lord tells us that Moses and the prophets are sufficient for repentance, you have even more advantage than the people of Jesus' day. You not only have Moses and the prophets, you have the apostles as well. You have their testimony that someone has risen from the dead. You have every reason to listen and to believe.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.