

## **Remembrance, Repentance, Resurrection** **Luke 16:19-31**

**Robert W. Bertram**

[Sermon preached at the Fiftieth Anniversary Reunion, Class of '39, Concordia Lutheran High School, Fort Wayne, Indiana, 24 September 1989.]

### I

Sisters and brothers, I must admit that if I had followed my own hunch I would never have chosen this parable of "The Rich Man and Lazarus" as the sermon text for this morning's service. But that only tells you how unimaginative I am. I could not see, at least at first, how such a grim story about heaven and hell could have anything to say to such a festive occasion as this. And a festive occasion it is. Our service folder carries the title, "A Memorial Service." This is a time for grateful remembrance, a reminder of all the good things in our lives which have come our way.

On the other hand, this parable from the sixteenth chapter of Luke is the gospel lesson appointed for this nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost. And my experience has been that the traditional scripture lessons, no matter what the occasion, seldom let us down. So I reread the parable. And what do you know, look what it says: "My son, remember." Doesn't that sound like reminder, memorial? True, that reminder, "My son, remember," is what Father Abraham calls down to the rich man in Hades. That may not be exactly what we had in mind by a service of remembrance. But then isn't that just like the scriptures, always full of surprises?

"My son, remember . . ." Remember what? "Remember," says Abraham to the rich man in torment, "that during your life good things came your way, just as bad things came the way of Lazarus. Now he is being comforted here while you are in agony." Sons and daughters, remember how many good things came your way instead of to someone else in your life, some Lazarus who then had to go without. Remember how often it has happened that one person's gain is another person's loss, and you were the gainer.

The losers might have been our own children or our spouses or our parents or our customers or colleagues or our highschool classmates or more likely, people at the edges of our lives whom we discreetly neglected and forgot. Remember all the good things we could enjoy only because those Lazaruses in our world subsidized our enjoyment by their starvation - their starvation not only for our food but also for our time and respect and affection.

And remember, as God surely does, simple justice requires that such unfairness must eventually be rectified. Sooner or later God, The Great Equalizer, will have to redress that wretched imbalance which we have inflicted upon the family by means of our privileges and advantages. We do remember, I presume, who those Lazaruses in our lives have been. Or are they by now too hard, too many to remember? That is a kind of

forgetfulness that we cannot blame on old age. Yet the Lazaruses whom we forget, the parable reminds us, God never will forget.

Moreover, says Abraham to the rich man, "that is not all: between us and you a great gulf has been fixed, to stop anyone, if he wanted to, crossing from our side to yours, and to stop any crossing from your side to ours." During this lifetime there is still opportunity to make that crossing from our side to those whom we edge out. Now there is still time to equalize their hardships with our blessings. But inevitably there comes the time, there comes death, when suddenly it is too late for such crossings. Then the gap is permanently un-crossable. Then the equalizing is forever out of our hands and we shall be the ones to be equalized.

Brothers and sisters, remember. No one who has reached our ripe age, no one who has enjoyed the good things we have - our Christian high school education being just one of them, our friends in this room being but another -- no one who has gotten so many good things, as I am sure we have too, at the expense and sacrifice or to the exclusion and disadvantage of the Lazaruses all around us, I say no one like us is exempt from the final settling of accounts, the coming Great Equalizer.

Abraham's reminder speaks to us, too: My sons and daughters, remember. Really, the reminder is not just from Abraham but from Jesus, who tells the parable. But he is telling us not after it is too late, the way Abraham is telling the rich man, but now already while there is still time. We should not need someone like Jesus to bring us that reminder, someone who returns from the dead. That is not what Jesus' resurrection is for. As he says, scriptures are already reminder enough - "Moses and the prophets" -- which we all read and heard back in this high school, and long before and ever since. Remember?

## II

That is the first R. R is for "remember." The second is like unto it: R is for "repentance." The third R will be for "resurrection." Actually, you cannot talk about the one without talking about the other two, especially in the gospel of Luke. For Luke, all three come to much the same thing. Remembrance is repentance is resurrection.

In this parable of the rich man and Lazarus, what else does Jesus mean by "remember" except "repent?" Even the rich man in Hades senses there is some connection between the two, remembering and repenting, though by that time he can no longer bring off either one of them. What he himself is no longer able to do, he imagines maybe his surviving brothers might still do. And what is that? He calls it "repent." "If someone comes to them from the dead, they [at least] will repent." That is the same thing Abraham had called remembering. But the rich man, now that he is in Hades, cannot remember anymore than he can repent.

The rich man doesn't really remember Lazarus. Oh, maybe he recognizes that the character snuggled in Abraham's bosom is that same beggar name of Lazarus who used to lie outside his gate. But does he remember Lazarus for who he truly is and always was, the darling of God, every bit as much the equal of the rich man himself? No. The only

way the rich man can think of Lazarus, even now in the afterlife, is still the same old self-centered way he had always thought of him, What good is Lazarus to me - except maybe to shag him back to my brothers or to shag him down here with water for my tongue. The rich man had not learned a thing. He had lost his memory altogether, that is, his ability to repent.

This service, as we noted, is a "memorial" service, a service of remembrance. But by that token it is likewise a service of repentance. You have been making that very clear all weekend, especially this morning. And how? By how we have been treating one another. I mean, by how we have been remembering one another. We have been remembering one another, let me say it, repentantly. We do not seem to be thinking about one another in those old self-serving ways we might have fifty years ago: what advantage is he or she to me, who is in which in-group and who is out of it, who is smarter or cuter or more popular than whom? Who are the ones who have it and who are the Lazaruses who don't?

By contrast, I dare to say, look at us now, this weekend, this morning. Now we are remembering one another ever so magnanimously. There seems to be little interest any longer in impressing one another but remarkable interest in sharing with one another whatever we have accumulated: our funny experiences and stories, our joys and sorrows, our losses and gains, the truth. This weekend has been a kind of equalization, making up differences, evening out the old imbalances. One gets the distinct impression that each believes the other to be the darling of God, every bit the equal of oneself. In a few moments we shall stand up and turn to one another and say, "The peace of the Lord be with you." When that happens, it is impossible any longer to tell who among us are the Lazaruses and who are not. That is a fresh sign of what our Lord calls repentance.

Oh, I don't mean there was none of that family-feeling before. There was indeed, often miraculously so. I thank God for that, and thank you. But as though that were not already blessing enough, today the family is evident in special measure. True, the cynic in me is tempted to explain all that away, our new and favorable remembering of one another. I am tempted to write that off instead to our failing memories, our wishful nostalgia, the tendency of old age to romanticize the past. But I know better than that, as a believer I do. That is not the whole explanation, not for those who are family in Christ Jesus. Why not admit it, sisters and brothers: this Christ does have a way with us? He does make a difference, he and his Father and their Hallowing Spirit - a difference also in how we remember one another, repentantly.

Sure, someone might still argue that after all we are having to remember one another so repentantly for only this one ceremonial weekend and that once this is over we'll be back to the old rich man-Lazarus sort of memories. Frankly, I doubt that. Still, I suppose we would have to admit that, yes, we are not yet fully in the resurrection.

### III.

That brings us to the final R: R is for resurrection. "Not fully in the resurrection," but that does not mean not at all in the resurrection. In the gospel according to Luke, as we noted, remembering amounts to repenting, but that is also resurrection, at least the beginning of

resurrection. Have you noticed how that, too, not just our remembering and repenting but also our resurrection, has begun to show?

In the parable that was another thing the rich man never grasped, how repentance is already a part of the new and resurrected life. Repentance is not, as he thought, some painful price we pay on earth in order to get to heaven later. Repentance is not just some bitter pill we swallow here in order to gain recovery there. No, repentance is already that blessed recovery at work. Repentance is not just renouncing one's old ways and repudiating oneself -- it is that too, no doubt -- but it is the losing of our old lives only because they are already being replaced by new ones in Christ. This the rich man could not understand.

Notice, why did he want Lazarus to return from the dead to impress his brothers? He thought it would take something as startling as that, a resuscitated corpse, to scare the daylights out of them and bring them to what he called repentance. What a misuse of resurrection that is! And what a one-sided, negative picture of repentance!

God does send back to us One who has died, not Lazarus but the resurrected Jesus. However, the reason he returns from the dead is not to terrify us to death and remorse. Then why does he return? To show us in advance what our repentant remembering is already on the way to becoming, life with him beyond the sepulchre. This vivacious sort of repentance, laughing through tears here and now, is a foretaste of the feast to come, a pre-partying at the table of Abraham.

No, repentance is not some price we pay in order to buy resurrection. Repentance is the resurrection in its early stages, its teeth stages. Our thirteen classmates who are deceased have already died in a way that we have not, not yet. On that score they are a step ahead of us. But as for resurrection, that we too have begun to enjoy. No wonder we celebrate as we do.

Our class motto reads, "We're not finished, just beginning." As we heard last evening, Rich Dickmeyer has suggested a revision: "we're not finished but you can sure see the end from here." The end, of course, is Easter, everlasting Easter. But among brothers and sisters like you Easter always comes early. I can already see it from where you are and by how you remember one another. How remarkably well you remember one another, so well that you improve on the past and even scoop the future. It is amazing how, as you mellow, you more and more resemble The Coming Great Equalizer: not as he comes in judgment but as he came to be our equal, the poor Lazarus, Jesus, who lay in suffering and death outside our gates. For all your extra pounds and wrinkles and stiffening joints, or maybe because of them, how much you begin to act and sound like that resurrected Lazarus, the risen Christ who comes back to us in love, and with infinitely more than water for our tongues.

It is true, isn't it, sisters and brothers: we may not be the end of the world but you can see it from here? So, then, why wait with the celebrating! Let us greet one another, The peace of the Lord be with you.

Robert W. Bertram