

"Rags to Riches" Luke 16:19-31 Trinity 1 2024

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

I've always enjoyed a good rags-to-riches story. My kids have watched Annie many times, and I have come to really enjoy that musical. One of my favourite old movies is called Great Expectations, which was based on Charles Dickens' novel of the same name. I've enjoyed the biographies of people like Andrew Carnegie, J.K. Rowling, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Dolly Parton. It is neat to see how people who come from nothing can become something. It is encouraging to see how hard work can pay off. We enjoy these rags to riches stories, whether it is the story of real people like Steve Branson, or fictional ones like Cinderella. Their stories are encouraging, instructive, and inspiring. Equally interesting and instructive, though, can be the opposite: riches to rags stories. It is just as common to hear stories about celebrities, athletes, and investors who had it all and then lost it all. Their stories often serve as great warnings! This morning, Luke shows us both sides of this in our parable as he builds on his great reversal theme. We see a rags-to-riches story and riches-to-rags one that serves to warn and instruct!

Jesus begins our parable by introducing us to two different and opposite men. The first man we meet is the rich man, who is historically called "Dives." "Dives" means "rich" in Latin. The rich man wears purple clothes, which screams, "I have money! I'm rich!" Purple was an expensive color and came from snail's blood. Can you imagine how many snails it would take to make something purple?! Purple is an expensive color! Along with that, the man wore fine linen and feasted sumptuously every day. This would be extravagant and unheard of! Who feasts and parties daily? The man is a picture of excess and self-indulgence.

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Just outside his door we find our second character, Lazarus. This is the only time in any parable, that Jesus gives a character a name. Lazarus means “one whom God helps,” and the fact that he has a name, hints that he is important to God and precious in his sight. Lazarus finds himself on the other end of the spectrum, though. Lazarus is a poor man and is tossed in front of the rich man’s gate, just outside of where he lives and feasts in luxury. Unlike the rich man who is dressed in purple and fine linen, Lazarus is dressed in sores that immobilize him. It is why he is set outside his gate. Maybe someone there will help, and something does! To make his situation worse and more pitiful, packs of dogs would come and lick his sores. It was the only aid he got, and this was both helpful and humiliating.

In the ancient world, dogs were seen as loathsome and repulsive creatures, which is the opposite of today, where dogs can be treasured and considered part of the family! While the licking of the dogs helped Lazarus and gave relief, it humiliated and hurt his reputation in the process. This pitiful aid came at a cost! As he sits outside the gate, he also starves, wishing for just the crumbs that fell from the rich man’s table. You probably couldn’t find a pair of more opposite men!

To no one’s surprise, Jesus says that Lazarus died. Instead of being tossed down to hell, he is lifted by angels to heaven. He receives divine help where human aid was lacking, and he is taken to Abraham’s side, perhaps the place of honor at a heavenly banquet! Talk about a rags-to-riches!

But what about the rich man, Dives? What happened to him? If poor old Lazarus is at Abraham’s side, where will the prestigious rich man end up? Hell. Unlike Lazarus who is at Abraham’s side, the rich

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man finds himself in hell and in great torment. While in great agony, he lifts his eyes and sees Abraham with Lazarus. He knows those guys, perhaps they can help! And for the purpose of the parable, they are close enough for a conversation.

The rich man calls out, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me!" In other words, "Help!" and he gives Abraham a suggestion. He tells Abraham, "Send Lazarus to help me. Have him just dip his finger in water to put on my tongue. You have no idea how much that will help!" The man is in so much anguish that even a drop, a drop of water, would help!

Abraham responds with care and concern saying, "Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us." In other words, "I couldn't do anything and couldn't if I wanted to you. You're stuck there, child!" Sad to say, this is a frightening story of riches-to-rags!

But, why are they where they are? Why the great reversal? Why is Lazarus in heaven, and the rich man in hell? It is not that Lazarus is rewarded for being poor and the rich man punished for being wealthy. It is because of faith. Lazarus wasn't saved because he was poor, but because of faith. The rich man wasn't condemned because of his riches, but they certainly didn't help. His love of money blinded him to his truest need, grace. It blinded him to the needs of others. Lazarus was at his very doorstep, after all. But, worst of all, his love of wealth blinded his eyes and closed his ears to the Word of Moses and the Prophets, who pointed to Christ and

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foretold him. It wasn't what he did that condemned him, but what he didn't do: believe.

Realizing his mistake, the rich man continues his role reversal with Lazarus, and begs. He says, "Abraham, I have five brothers and I want them to avoid my fate. Send Lazarus back to warn them." But Abraham says, "No. They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them." Knowing his siblings, he says, "No, that won't do. The Word isn't enough. If someone from the dead might come, then they would listen." For the second time, Abraham tells the man the Word is enough. He says, "If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should be rise from the dead." The word is enough for faith and repentance. Some miracle or divine display is not needed! What a story of rags-to-riches, and riches-to-rags! What a reversal!

But remember the point of such stories and parables. Their messages and points are for us. They are told to instruct and to warn. Like the rich man, we hear that God's Word is enough for faith and repentance. Jesus stresses that twice back-to-back! For in His Word, God not only reveals the selfishness of our lives and thoughts, but, also, the selflessness of His Son. In fact, we see the greatest riches-to-rags, and rags-to-riches story. The greatest missionary of all time puts it this way: "though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

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On the cross, Jesus expended not money, but Himself, His life, His blood, to pay the price of us sinners. He paid the price so we could be His! He gave it all for you and won it all for you. We have a great treasure in heaven! In His Word, God gives us a sure testimony of His Son's victory in His resurrection, which is the guarantee of our salvation. The brothers of the rich man would never repent, even if, Lazarus came back from the dead. But they had enough. They had Moses and the Prophets, but we have more! We have not just the Old Testament, but also the New. We have not just the promise, but also the fulfillment. We have the Gospel, the power of God for salvation!

And we have that powerful Word, which is made tangible and present for us today, right here, right now. In preaching and in the absolution, we hear the absolute assurance that our sins are forgiven, and that we have a place by Abraham in heaven. In the Lord's Supper, we have the Word made visible that touches not just our ears, but also our lips and hearts, when we receive the body and blood of Christ for the forgiveness of sins. In His powerful Word, God gives us Himself, He gives Himself to rescue us from our sin and self-centeredness. By this Word, He works in us and makes His children.

As His children, He knows our name, showing our importance and value in His sight. Our needs, wants, and cares don't escape His sight. He is our Father; He will help in the way that is best. Have no fear. We are a Lazarus to Him, "one whom He helps!", and have a place with Him in eternity! In Jesus Christ, you are a rags-to-riches story! Amen.