

“We love him, because he first loved us.” (1 St. John 4.19)

How many times have we, in our lives, failed to understand something that was presented plainly before our eyes? Sometimes it's not until we have the benefit of hindsight that we can see what was clearly laid out for us all along. In the last two weeks, for example, the pollen has been stirring up my allergies something fierce. Yet, I stubbornly go outside and do some yard work without taking an allergy pill, and then I pay the price. I knew what my reaction would be, I just thought that maybe *this time* would be different.

These things we fail to notice present themselves in all sorts of different ways. Maybe it was thinking we could get across the Westmoreland Street bridge on time during the day these past few weeks. Maybe it was something our parents used to tell us to try to prepare us for later in life. Maybe it was a teacher in school reminding you that failure is indeed an option. Maybe it was a romantic partner telling you some of the reasons the relationship wouldn't last unless some things changed. We tend to be stubborn people – creatures of habit – who often don't listen (and won't listen) to the warnings we're given until it's too late.

Jesus' disciples were human, too. And this is the theme of the parable we encounter in our Gospel lesson today about the rich man and Lazarus. The well-dressed, fancy, rich man had a beggar named Lazarus at his gate, and presumably he was an eyesore for the rich man and his guests. Not only was he a beggar, but was starving and sick. He had nothing, and was given nothing from the rich man's abundance, even though the rich man even knew him by name. Lazarus later died.

As happens to everyone, death – the great equalizer – came to the rich man too. Though, we are told, *he* was properly buried. When he opened his eyes, he found himself in a place of torment but could see Lazarus at the side of Abraham far off and across an expanse. The rich man pleaded with Abraham for some small amount of relief from his torment, but Abraham told him it was impossible, and that each Lazarus and the rich man were getting what they deserved: Lazarus abundance after living a neglected life, and the rich man penance after living a life of abundance. It recalls for us the phrase of Jesus, “he who humbles himself shall be exalted, and he who exalts himself shall be humbled.”

The rich man, realizing now that this could all have been avoided, pleads with Abraham to, at the very least, send a messenger to his living family members to warn them. But Abraham tells him that they have Moses and the prophets (that is, Scripture) to warn them, and if that is not enough, what difference would a person from the dead make? “If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.”

The rich man had the means to help and the knowledge that he could have helped Lazarus – for he even knew his name – but we are led to assume that he chose not to. This neglect led to a reversal of their positions in the eyes of God. This was an instance, an illustration, of a lack of love.

Now, remember that this was a parable Jesus was telling an assembled crowd. We are not meant to believe that this scenario happened, but what was Jesus teaching the crowd through this story? Primarily, of course, we have the intersection of wealth and generosity (and perhaps the lack thereof). This chapter of Luke's Gospel falls into a significant discourse of teachings that Jesus shares with the crowd – often teaching against money, riches, and a fancy life. For, he says elsewhere, “you cannot serve God and money” (Lk. 16.13).

But what other message was Jesus conveying here? If Abraham, in this parable, kept pointing to the teaching of Moses and the Prophets, just what was he pointing at? Luke, later in his Gospel, gives us the answer. Following the Resurrection of Jesus, Luke tells the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Jesus meets two disciples travelling, who knew that Jesus was missing from the tomb that morning, but did not yet understand what was happening. Here we are told that Jesus, “beginning with Moses and all the Prophets...interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Lk. 24.27). The answer to the question, as a classic Sunday School answer might be, is Jesus. The Parable is saying to the crowd directly, and to us indirectly, that Jesus is what Moses and Prophets are pointing to – Jesus is the warning for those who are yet alive – and he is the one who comes back from the dead to make sure people know how to live a good, and Godly, life.

And how, then, are we to live such a life? It is as we are reminded all the time in Scripture and every week in our services: *“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God... and thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself... On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets”*. Love God and love your neighbour. This, love, is the key. If at Christmas we say that “Jesus is the reason for the season”, then we can just as well say that “love is the reason for the season”. For by love, Jesus was born on the earth to save the earth. For by love, Jesus was tortured and killed for the world. For by love he destroyed death and rose again from the dead. By love he ascended into heaven and sent the Holy Spirit. And through love, the three persons of our One united God are bound together, as the Archbishop said last week.

The Christian story is one that, at its best, is founded in love and deeply rooted in love. And it is so when we are deeply rooted in God, for God *is* love. Our Epistle lays this out rather clearly for us today – especially positioned as it is against our Gospel. “Love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God” (1 St. John 4.7). I’m just going to read the Epistle some more, because St. John really does the preaching for me:

“By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Saviour of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.” (1 John 4.13-21)

The love we share, the love we have for one another, is a marker of our love of God. St. John says that those who share in the love of God have nothing to fear come the day of judgement because we are able to share in himself – his own being – through love. In this Epistle passage, we get a direct answer to the rich man’s problem. Why did he end up where he did? Because he did not love his neighbour, he did not love Lazarus as though he were himself. He did not share with him the love of God, for the rich man did not know it himself.

As we begin our new Trinity season, we once again are called to remember all the love of God that has been shown to us through the person of Jesus Christ. This first half of the Church’s year has shown us, in powerful displays of might, how deep God’s love goes – it shows us to what heights and depths it goes through Jesus’ birth and death. The stories that we recall year after year give us examples of this love which keep telling us the warning, the message, in case we’ve forgotten what it’s all about. We are reminded that we are empowered and emboldened by the Holy Spirit, and invited into the union of our Triune God through the love that each of the persons exhibits in the story of Salvation.

And with that reminder, with that knowledge, we are encouraged to grow. With the knowledge of the love of God refreshed in our minds through the recollection of Jesus’ life, we are geared up and ready to go: to share this love, to learn more about how we participate in this love, and to put the rubber to the road. When we truly know God’s love for us, we are compelled to share it with others we meet. We are compelled to love our neighbour who is begging for the crumbs on our table because we know that without God’s love we ourselves are unworthy to eat from God’s table.

God loves you, so try, as best as you are able, to love God. Even if you mess up, try again. He loves you so much that you can try again and try again and try again. But do try to love him, since he first loved you.

As we journey into this new half of the Church’s year, let us heed the warning of Abraham to the rich man and pay attention to the one whom Moses and the Prophets point: Jesus of Nazareth; God the Son. And when the day comes for us to face the judgement of God, as we all will, I hope that you and I will know him, and will have helped others to see that he is love.

And now unto God Almighty, the ✠ Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, be ascribed all might, majesty, dominion, power, honour, and glory as is most justly due. Henceforth and forevermore. Amen.