

**Sermon for Sunday, September 25, 2022**  
**Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**“Jesus Went to Hell (and Other Good News for the World)”**  
**Rev. Amy Zalk Larson**  
**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church Decorah, Iowa**

[Click here to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

Beloved people of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

This story makes me wonder. I have so many questions.

Why wouldn't the rich man help someone right at his gate, someone so clearly in need?  
He ate great food every day. He wore all the best clothes.  
He had more than enough to help.  
Why did he just pass by?

Apparently, this rich man even knew Lazarus by name!  
Isn't it harder to ignore someone's pain when you know their name?  
Why didn't he stop? Why wouldn't he help?

Was he thinking:

- Those sores are awful, I don't want to get near them.
- Lazarus might be angry, he might not be safe.
- He must have done something wrong to end up where he is.
- God has blessed me with wealth, God must be punishing him.

Did the rich man feel guilty?

He was ignoring God's teachings through Moses and the prophets, teachings that call us to be in a right relationship with those who are poor.

Was guilt weighing on him?

Did he feel worse with each passing day, until finally he was paralyzed by shame?  
Did he think, Ahh, I don't know what to do, how to help. There are so many poor people, so many problems. I don't know where to begin.

Was he happy, at peace?

Was he lonely?

Did he experience the life that really is life? Or was he in his own private hell on earth, separated from the generous, abundant, connected life that God longs for us to know.

It seems the great chasm between these two men formed when they were still alive.

How did the rich man get so stuck?

How did we get so stuck?

- Why has a great chasm grown between us and those at our gates, on our southern border?
- How have white people become so separated from our siblings of color?
- We in the US have so much more food and wealth than two-thirds of the world, but we experience record levels of isolation and anxiety.

- People in the two-thirds world know so well how to feast and tend to community yet long for even some of the food we throw out each day.

Is there any hope of change? Of healing? Can we still be saved, here and now, from isolation and agony? From paralyzing shame? From hell on earth?

In Jesus' shocking parable, there's no hope for the rich man. He's stuck in torment forever. He's powerless. That's a new feeling for someone used to getting what he wants on demand. Others have always tended to his needs, made him comfortable, done his dirty work. Resources and connections have shielded him from the worst of the world's suffering. His problems could be easily solved with enough money. But there's no helping him now. The chasm is fixed, firm, nothing can change. There may not even be help for the rich man's brothers who refuse to listen.

So what hope is there for us? Is this parable saying we better start sharing or we'll end up in hell forever? It's important to remember what Jesus' parables do. In last week's sermon, Rev. Allie Scott offered such helpful insight into this. She said, "A parable is not a fable with a sweet little moral at the end of the story" ... and continued, "Parables shock us out of our expectations, make us question our fundamental values in this world, and show us the ways in which God is at work."

This shocking parable of the rich man and Lazarus gets under our skin. It lets us experience that great chasm our sin causes, and helps us know the limits of our power. It awakens us to the hell on earth that we are living, that we are perpetuating. We are captive to our sin. We are in need. On our own, we can't solve the grave problems we face. We can't, by sheer force of will, overcome racism, the global wealth gap, the climate crisis that most impacts those with fewer resources. Relationships with others aren't something we can have on demand.

We need God, the hope of the world. We need God's kingdom to come on earth.

In God's kingdom the poor and downtrodden have their needs met. The rich and powerful are taken down a notch or two or ten, for our own good. In God's kingdom, people are freed from physical captivity, and from shame. Our eyes are opened to one another, we are drawn together. The playing field is leveled, and relationships are healed. We all experience the life that really is life - a life of abundance, relationship, joy.

As we are drawn into God's kingdom, we see that we are never fully healed until all are well, never fully nourished until all have enough, never enough on our own. In God's kingdom we see our need to give and receive. And this is our hope - that God is always working to bring us all into the kingdom. Jesus came to us to announce the kingdom of God is here among you. Jesus came to shock us, get under our skin, open our eyes, and gather us into life-giving relationship with God and others. And, nothing can stop Jesus from doing this, not even death, not even hell. Jesus even went to hell to bring us back, to overcome all those great chasms, all that separates us from God and one another. Jesus still enters each of our private hells on earth, each new day, to raise us to new life.

Nothing, **nothing** can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus. This love sets you free. You are set free from guilt and shame, free from a life of demanding everything go your way. You are set free for life in the kingdom - a life of love and joy, service and generosity, real relationship.

Here today, in worship together, we experience God's kingdom among us. We are shaped by parables and psalms that help us recognize it. We are humbled and raised up and drawn together with people we might otherwise overlook. At the table, we get a foretaste of the feast that all will share. We are sent to join God in bringing in the kingdom here on earth.

This is the life that really is life.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.