

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, September 30, 2007
Rev. John Tapscott

“WORDS OF WARNING; WORDS OF COMFORT”

Luke 16:19-31

When I moved to Nova Scotia in 1987 to begin my ministry I discovered that the traffic laws, though similar to Ontario's, also differed in some ways. If you are convicted for speeding in Nova Scotia you lose money and points, plus you must surrender your driver's licence for seven days! Going without your license for seven days takes some planning. But the good news is that officers often give you a warning when they pull you over, if you are not too far over the speed limit! In my first three years there I received three speeding warnings and not convictions, thank goodness! It helped that each time I had my clergy collar on and told the officer that I was on my way to a church service, or to visit someone in hospital, or heading home after a church meeting. That was all true! But after three warnings I knew I was tempting fate. I slowed down and never received one after that! Warnings are not bad things at all. In fact, they often contain seeds of good news.

God's word both warns us and comforts us. That's the nature of Holy Scripture. It's certainly true in Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31).

A rich man in expensive clothes feasted every day. Lazarus, a poor beggar lay at his gate seeking only his scraps. His only comforters were dogs who licked his sores. Lazarus died and was carried by angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man died and was buried. In Hades he was in torment. He lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham and Lazarus far off. "Father Abraham," he cried out, "have mercy on me, for I am in anguish in this flame. Send Lazarus to dip his finger in water and cool my tongue." Abraham said, "Son, remember that you received good things, and Lazarus evil things, but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And between us and you a great chasm has been fixed through which no one can pass." Finally, the rich man began to think of someone other than himself. "Send Lazarus back to warn my brothers." But Abraham said, "Let them hear Moses and the prophets; all they need to avoid your fate is right there." "Father Abraham", said the rich man, "they will only repent if someone goes to them from the dead." Abraham said, "If they won't listen to Moses and the prophets, even someone rising from the dead won't convince them."

Scholars believe Jesus was directing this parable to the Jewish group known as Sadducees. They believed God was blessing them with wealth and success because they were keeping God's commandments. Further, they believed that poverty was a result of sin and

that helping a man like Lazarus would only interfere with God's process of disciplining and correcting him.

Now certain Scriptures may suggest that, but others indicate quite the opposite. Wealth does not always mean one is being obedient, nor does poverty indicate that one is being wicked. Further, scripture commanded the nation to bless and help the poor in the land. The Sadducees were not listening. In addition, they did not believe in the after-life or resurrection. So Jesus' parable blew the Sadducees' theology out of the water. The parable stood as a clear warning about their beliefs and their way of life.

But the parable and indeed God's word contains warning and comfort for us all. We have Moses and the prophets *and* the New Testament. And the Scriptures are made even more sure by the fact that the One of whom Scripture speaks is the One who rose from the dead. Now in the parable the warnings may be obvious. But comfort is there too, if it is read in the light of the whole Gospel. God's word in this parable both warns us and comforts us.

First of all, let's think about how God's word here warns us.

Well, for one thing it certainly warns us against a self-centred, self-focussed life. A life like the rich man's which was concerned only for your own comfort and satisfaction, while at the same time ignoring the beggar at your gate is a ticket to hell.

Oh, none of us would be so hard-hearted as the rich man, but we constantly have to guard becoming like that. There is much pressure, both internal and external, to indulge ourselves and put ourselves first. When our personal interest is at stake, it's hard to see the common good or the needs of our neighbours. People say, "If I were to become rich somehow, I would become very generous. I would give much to church and charity." Well, perhaps. But more tends to turn us in ourselves. Now many rich people give away much. But studies show that the higher a person's income becomes, the lower percentage of their income they give away. Scripture warns against self-sufficient, self-centred living.

God's word here also warns us against love of money. Scripture doesn't condemn money per se or hard work or working for a big cause which happens to bring monetary gain. But Scripture warns us against making the pursuit of money alone our purpose. Money is a tool, but not an end in itself. Scripture says that the love of money is the root of all evils. One problem with falling in love with money is that we can never have enough. A rich man was asked, "How much money does a person need to be happy?" And he replied, "Always just a little more than you have." If you make acquiring money your greatest goal, you will never be content. And this is true whether you have much or you have little. The Bible warns us against love of money. Make sure your life's goal is big enough for your soul.

The parable also warns us about thinking that this world is all there is. Now scholars tell us that parables are not literal in every detail. But Jesus' parable has an unmistakable warning. There is life beyond this world and there are alternatives. And the life you live and decisions you make here are tied to where you spend eternity.

The Christian author Nell Mohny was reading a book on an air plane flight. A curious seven year old in the seat beside her said, "That book you're reading is about Christianity." Surprised, Mohny said, "My, you can read big words." "Well, I am in I am in Grade two," said the little girl. "Is that book about heaven and hell?" she asked. "Sort of," Mohny replied. The girl said, "I know what heaven is. It is where people go when they die if they love Jesus. Hell is where people go when they have done bad things, and I know how people get to hell." Now Nell Mohny was the curious one, "How do people get to hell?" The little girl answered matter-of-factly, "They go by helicopter." So now you know. Stay clear of helicopters. Scripture warns us against living as if there is nothing beyond this world.

Now after all of these warnings, where can we possibly find comfort in this parable? Well, our comfort comes from the one who told it, the one who died and rose again, Jesus Christ our Lord. Jesus Christ is God's word of comfort now and for eternity.

Now let's not misunderstand. The Gospel is not that the rich go to hell, and the poor go to heaven. It's not that simple, anymore than the Sadducees' belief that riches are a sign of God's blessings and poverty a sign of his disapproval. For in truth we are all poor before God. No one, rich, poor, or in-between does God's will as we should. There is a gulf between what God created us to be and what we are. Before God's holiness we see our condition - spiritually poor, wounded, sore afraid.

But do you know what the name Lazarus means? It means "the one whom God helps." Now God can't help those who are self-sufficient, who think they don't need his mercy, like the rich Sadducees. But if we are willing to receive God's help, He most assuredly helps us. In love God helps us through his Son, who was born in a Bethlehem stable, shared our flesh, lived without sin, but went to hell for our sake, bearing the agony, enduring the flame, taking upon himself our wounds and sins on the Cross, dying, buried and rising again to live forevermore. By his death and resurrection Christ put a bridge across the great chasm so that whoever will may come home to God by faith. There may be a time, of course, when it's too late to give Christ our faith and trust. But certainly it's not too late for all who here and now hear and heed God's word. Trusting in Christ now, we are safe in his bosom, now and for eternity. Christ is the true rich man, rich in mercy, rich in compassion, rich in love. He came for the rich, for the poor, for all in between. He is the way to eternal life for all people. Christ is our comfort and our hope in life and in death.

Often we have assumed that Jesus was poverty-stricken through his whole life. Certainly he was through his three years of ministry, depending fully on God's provision and the support of his followers. But in his earlier life, he may not have been so poor. There is an interesting story about Jesus, not in the Bible, but written by Justin Martyr, one of Christianity's first historians and apologists. He lived from 100 - 165 AD. Justin Martyr says that Joseph and Jesus indeed had a carpenter's shop in Nazareth and made farm equipment - plows and yoke for oxen. Jesus was the local Massey-Ferguson dealer. People came from all over to buy yoke for their animals, because they were the best made and best-fitting yokes in the country. Justin claimed to have seen some of these yokes which survived into the 2nd century. Jesus' spiritual saying, "My yoke is easy," may have originated at the work bench in Nazareth. Jesus was not rich, but neither was he completely empty handed. He likely belonged to the middle class. Of course, he gave up everything as he began his ministry. But as some have said, it was because Jesus gave up something significant that gave him credibility when he asked people, some very rich, to give up all to follow him. There may be more than just spiritual meaning behind Paul's words that "Jesus, though he was rich, became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich." Now this is interesting and partly speculation, of course. No one knows for certain. But in any case, Jesus bridged the chasm between God and humanity, between Jew and Gentile, between heaven and hell, between rich and poor. Christ the true rich man. He is our Saviour. He is our comfort and our hope in life and in death.

And once we realize our own spiritual poverty and put our trust in Christ to save us there is no way we can ignore the poor man at our gates. Having recognized our own poverty, we can never again be indifferent to poverty in any of its forms. Christ opens our eyes to the ones who lie at our gate. He transforms our lives, our hearts, our ambitions, our eternal destiny. We are Lazarus, those whom God helps, those whom Christ saves, those who share Christ's risen life now and forevermore. And right now Christ is calling and empowering us to bring refreshing water to all who thirst in body and spirit. Let us hear his word and do it.

