

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

September 25, 2022 – PENTECOST 16 / PROPER 21, YR. C

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: *"It's Not About the Money"*

Amos 6:1a, 4-7 (Faithless Israel's exile foretold)
Psalm 146 (The Lord is a God of justice and mercy)
1 Timothy 6:11-19 (All who remain faithful will receive eternal life)
St. Luke 16:19-31 (Jesus warns those who refuse to believe)

On May 11, 1996 ValuJet Flight 592 burst into flames and crashed, minutes after taking off from Miami International Airport. All 110 people aboard were killed. The accident investigation was hampered by poor visibility and a swampy site inhabited by snakes and alligators that was only reachable by helicopter.¹ Finally, after more than two weeks, divers retrieved from the Florida Everglades the "black box" containing the plane's cockpit voice recorder.²

As the National Transportation and Safety Board listened to the tape, trying to discover from the grave why the plane had gone down so hard and fast, they heard the pilots yell shortly after takeoff: "We're losing everything!" Seven seconds later, "We're on fire, we're on fire!" And a minute and five seconds after that: "... completely on fire." Sixty seconds later, the recording ended.³

What we have in today's Gospel is a man who also has crashed and is burning. As we read in verses 23-24 of the Contemporary English Version: "He went to hell and was suffering terribly. When he looked up and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side, he said to Abraham, 'Have pity on me! Send Lazarus to dip his finger in water and touch my tongue. I'm suffering terribly in this fire.'"

Just as the words from the cockpit voice recorder provided clues to the airliner's crash, the words of the rich man warn Jesus' hearers about the reality of hell. It is a place of torment. In verse 24, the man cries out in anguish, "I am in agony in these flames."

"The Bible describes hell as a place of outer darkness, a lake of fire, a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth, a place of eternal separation from the blessings of God, a prison, [and] a place of torment ...," The Late Dr. R.C. Sproul, an American Reformed theologian wrote. "Perhaps the most frightening aspect of hell is its eternity. People can endure the greatest agony if they know it will ultimately stop. In hell there is no such hope. The Bible clearly teaches that the punishment is eternal. ... Punishment implies pain. ... Hell, then, is an eternity before the righteous, ever-burning wrath of God, a suffering torment from which there is no escape and no relief. Understanding this is crucial to" appreciating the work of Christ and to preaching His gospel.⁴

But who goes to hell, and who goes to heaven? A story is told about a pastor and a New York taxi driver who both died. They arrive at the pearly gates and are greeted by St. Peter. To cut it short, the taxi driver is richly rewarded while the preacher just squeaks by. That's because when the preacher prayed, people fell asleep. But when the taxi driver raced through the streets, people prayed hard!⁵

Okay, all joking aside, for Jesus this is a deadly serious subject. However, is today's parable truly about the afterlife, or is Our Lord using a classic "reversal of fortune" story to instruct us in how we should live our lives in the here and now?

A few chapters before this, Jesus had condemned the Pharisees for their love of money and their lack of mercy toward the poor. In Luke 11:42 (NIV), Our Lord declares: "Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth ... but you neglect justice and the love of God." Jesus is not criticizing their piety or devotion. The issue is what the Pharisees are not doing—showing mercy to the poor and seeking justice for the downtrodden.

Jesus does not fail to highlight the irony that the Pharisees, who pride themselves on being such great Bible scholars, end up missing the heart of the Old Testament, which testifies to God's mercy and justice throughout. For example, in this morning's Psalm, verses 6-8, we read that God: "gives justice to those who are oppressed, and food to those who hunger. The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind; the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down ... the Lord cares for the stranger; he sustains the orphan and widow, but frustrates the way of the wicked."

William Barclay, a 20th-century New Testament professor and biblical scholar, titles this parable, “The Punishment of the Man Who Never Noticed.”⁶ Lazarus hung out near the rich man’s door but went unnoticed as he lay there filthy and hungering, feral dogs licking his ulcerous skin.

So, perhaps this parable isn’t about the dangers of riches, either, but about the sin of self-absorption. Excessive preoccupation with self-gratification breeds self-deception and from that lie, every other sin begins to fester. The rich man was far too absorbed in himself to see the beggar on his doorstep, and there is little reason to believe that in verse 27, he’s had a change of heart even after he ends up in hell. Expressing no remorse at all, rather, he is concerned, not with the needy and the oppressed on earth, but with the future of his own household.⁷

And what is it that will save the rich man’s family? Interestingly, the answer comes from an Old Testament saint, Abraham, the Patriarch of the Jewish people. His reply: The man and his family need to believe the Law and the Prophets, for these reveal God’s will for our lives. And the God who was at work long ago establishing those standards has now acted definitively and ultimately, in and through Jesus Christ, as the supreme example of God’s will for humanity.⁸

Abraham is telling the spiritually-poor rich man that the Holy Scriptures “contain all things necessary for our salvation”—as we read in *The Book of Common Prayer* (p. 526).

The Acts of the Apostles tells us that the Early Church continued to preach the message of Jesus by arguing from Old Testament Scripture (see Acts 2:16-36). And in his Gospel, St. Luke is careful throughout to show that what Jesus does and teaches is according to God’s Word, and that the Risen Christ enables His disciples to understand what Moses, the prophets, and the writings taught about the passion and resurrection of the Messiah.⁹

As 21st-century Christians who have the benefit of easy access to both the Old and New Testaments, and to the reality of the Risen Christ in our lives, if we neglect to believe in Jesus, and notice and minister to the poor, what excuse will we have when we stand before Our Lord? In the end, the rich man’s punishment is not for his wealth, but for failing to believe the Scriptures and to practice what they teach. It’s not about the money. It’s about compassion.

This doesn’t mean we should be charitable out of guilt or give unwisely to whoever cries the loudest. Rather, we are to love and care for every person—especially the least among us—as Christ has loved us. And we are to give generously of whatever assets we have, out of the love of God within us. Not selfishly, to assuage our guilt—or even out of fear of going to hell—but selflessly caring for the needs of others because the Lord has so richly provided for *our* needs.

What’s that you say? “Social Security is my only income,” or, “Hey, I’m just squeaking by with my mortgage payments,” or “My retirement fund is pretty shaky.” “So how can you say God is providing for me?” Believe me, I know what it’s like for money to be tight—especially with the current inflation in the U.S. But if we are paying attention to today’s Gospel at all, we must notice that Jesus isn’t only talking about money and wealth.

Our Lord is warning us more sternly against the vice of self-centeredness, and the sins of unbelief and failing to be merciful and caring toward all who suffer and are in need. Tithing ten percent of our money is fine. But do we give ten percent (or more) of *ourselves*—our time and efforts—to others, as well?

As you enter this new week, you might ask yourself: “Who is lying at my doorstep that I fail to notice, or have unkindly turned away?” Possessing all the financial comfort in the world will not benefit our souls in eternity. Only doing what’s right for Christ, and those whom He loves, will last.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, we thank You for Your innumerable blessings, chiefly for our salvation through Jesus Christ, without which nothing else matters. Give us greater hearts for the poor and suffering, and for the persecuted Church around the world. Please tear down the walls we build up to protect ourselves from others’ pain and the ugliness of life. Graciously inspire us to love the poor and the outcast, and to care for the least and the lost, as Jesus did, and loves them even now. And may we know and believe the Holy Scriptures, that we might truly be Christ’s disciples in thought, word, and deed. All this we ask through Christ Our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.¹⁰

⁰ Adapt. N. George Hacker, "Take off the Blinders," 26 September 2010, St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Cobleskill NY. Used with permission.

¹ Adapt. Jim Greenwell, The News Press, 8 April 2018, <<https://www.news-press.com/story/archive/2018/04/08/first-clues-surface-valujet-flight-592-crash-body-parts-and-engines-located/497430002/>> 16 September 2022. Used with permission.

² Adapt. Mireya Navarro, "'Black Box' is Recovered at Everglades Site," The New York Times, 27 May 1996 <<https://www.nytimes.com/1996/05/27/us/black-box-is-recovered-at-everglades-crash-site.html>> 16 September 2022. Used with permission.

³ "Cockpit voice recorder transcript of the May 11, 1996 crash of a ValuJet DC-9 (Flight 592) near Miami, FL. Source: NTSB/AAR-97/06," Aviation Safety Network, <https://aviation-safety.net/investigation/cvr/transcripts/cvr_vj592.php> 16 September 2022. Used with permission.

⁴ R.C. Sproul, "Hell," Essential Truths of the Christian Faith (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House, 1992), pp. 285-287.

⁵ Adapt. Rebelander Basilan, "Daily Joke: Pastor and a Taxi Driver Both Died and Went to Heaven," AmoMama.com, 17 November 2019, <<https://news.amomama.com/180344-daily-joke-pastor-a-taxi-driver-both-die.html>> 17 September 2022. Used with permission.

⁶ Adapt. Ralph W. Wilson, "The Rich Man and Lazarus," JesusWalk.com <<http://www.jesuswalk.com/luke/071-dives-lazarus.htm>> 16 September 2022. Used by permission

⁷ Walter Russell Bowie, John Knox, George Arthur Buttrick, and Paul Scherer, "The Gospel According to St. Luke," The Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VIII (New York: Abingdon, 1952), p. 291.

⁸ Marion Soards, Thomas Dozeman, Kendall McCabe, Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: After Pentecost, Year C (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), p. 58.

⁹ Fred. B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, Gene M. Tucker, Preaching Through the Christian Year: C (Valley Forge: Trinity Press Int'l., 1994), p. 423.

¹⁰ Adapt. Ralph W. Wilson, *op. cit.*