

6.6.2021 Trinity 1 (Luke 16:19-31)

Actions have consequences. That's an important lesson we learn at a very young age. When I think back on my childhood, several of the most vivid memories that come to mind are moments in which I learned that lesson. For example, I can tell you from experience that if you leave your bike laying in the driveway, your mom won't be able to see it and she'll back the car right over it, or if you come up with this bright idea to climb up on the roof of your house and throw water balloons at passing cars, the police will come knock on your door, and it may seem obvious, but I'm here to tell you that if you start the outboard motor on a small aluminum boat when nobody is sitting in the boat, it will take off without you.

Actions have consequences, and in our Gospel reading this morning we find it's equally true that inaction has consequences. In the passage we read today, Jesus illustrated that truth by telling a story that started like this: *“There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day: And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores, And desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table: moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried: And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom”* (Luke 16:19-23).

The story of the rich man and Lazarus is a vivid illustration of the fact that inaction has consequences, because when you picture the rich man in hell, and try to think of the reason he ended up there, you won't be able to pin it on something he did, but rather, on something he didn't do. The rich man is not described as an evil-doer, a thief, an adulterer, or a murderer. Nowhere does Jesus say that the man lied and cheated or was filled with envy and hatred. We may think of the rich man as suffering in hell because of that kind of mortal sin, but when you consider only those facts presented in the story, it's clear that the sin which brought such torment upon him is the sin of inaction, the sin of doing absolutely nothing to help his neighbor.

The rich man was so self-centered, so consumed by the pleasures of his own life that he refused to take even a moment to care for Lazarus, and Jesus provides this example to the end that we may recognize this type of sin in our

own lives. Yes, we sin by what we do, but we can also sin by what we fail to do. Sins of omission and of neglect are serious, and this is why during Morning and Evening Prayer, we confess to Almighty God that we have “left undone those things which we ought to have done.” As we kneel before our Lord each day and pray those words, we should be asking God to bring to our mind those things we’ve failed to do. The ways that we have not, in thought and word and deed, actively loved God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. The ways that we haven’t reached out as the Body of Christ, the hands and feet of Jesus in an effort to love our poor, neglected, suffering neighbor in the same way we love ourselves.

Inaction has consequences, and the imagery Jesus used in the story of the rich man and Lazarus brings to mind His words found in Matthew 25. In this description of the Last Judgement, the King says to those on His left hand, those who are told to depart from His presence, *“I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not”* (Matthew 25:42-43), and when those on His left hand begin to make excuses, the King answers, *“Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me”* (vs. 45). Once again, as it was in the example of the rich man, it’s not what these people did that condemned them, but rather, it’s what they didn’t do. They’d failed to perform the most basic acts of kindness and brotherly love, such as feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, providing clothing and shelter for the homeless, and visiting the sick and those in prison.

The Gospel we read this morning, and these verses from Matthew 25, are not written to condemn us, but to challenge us. The image of the rich man in hell, and the sound of the King’s voice telling those on His left hand to depart from Him, should disturb us. God wants us to be fully aware of the eternal importance of reaching out in love to care for those who need our help. God wants us to understand what St. John meant to communicate to us when he wrote this in today’s Epistle: *“Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love”* (1 John 4:8). Inaction has consequences, and when it comes to the act of love, the consequence of failing to act, the consequence of failing to love, is that a person won’t know God. *“Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.”*

In the end, we can see Lazarus, who laid at the rich man’s gate, starving and

full of sores, as an opportunity, even an invitation, for the rich man to love both God and his neighbor, an invitation he didn't accept; and we can see the beggar who lies at our gate, the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the homeless, and the sick as our opportunity to more perfectly love God, by loving our neighbor. May God give us grace to act, because actions have consequences, and when our actions are motivated by love for God and for our neighbor, these faithful acts reveal who we are, and whose we are. As Jesus said, "*By this shall all men know that ye are My disciples, if ye have love one to another*" (John 13:35). By God's grace may love more perfectly unite us to God, and make us known to the world He gave His life to save.