

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>22</sup>The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried;(Luke 16:22)

And so it was that the poor man's pallbearers were even more glorious than the rich man's. For the rich man's pallbearers — even if they should be dressed in purple and fine linen as beautiful as the rich man's had been — what is that compared to the beauty of the angels who carry poor Lazarus to Abraham's bosom?

In an instant, the conditions of these two are reversed. It is a comforting reversal in the one case, and a terrifying reversal in the other. For Lazarus, the change is good. Yea, it is wondrous, shining with eternal glory. In his earthly life, he suffered. That detail about the dogs licking his sores, for example, is troubling. Those sores must have been painful, especially to one who does not have a bed to lie in but lies on the sidewalk. How could he get comfortable? And the sores made him loathsome to passersby. And those dogs: Did they come to him to comfort him? Or was it that they were hungry and the man was too weak to shoo them away?

Well, as pitiful as the poor man's situation was, with Lazarus hungering for the scraps that fell from the rich man's table, even more pitiful is the situation of the rich man in Hades. In fact, it is hard to contemplate that scene. It is frightening to do so. Every ray of hope seems cut off for the man. He is in torment. Indeed his is in "anguish in this flame." That is a terrible kind of pain for a human being to bear: the flame. There is a gulf between him and the saints, and it is unbridgeable. And perhaps worst of all, his best sentiments there in Hades are fruitless. He wants to warn his brothers, so that they can avoid that terrible place, but the time for warning has past. The answer is No.

Now, we ought not to think that this reversal of fortunes is a *mechanical* kind of thing: that Lazarus goes up and the rich man goes down as

though by some mighty machine that hoists them according to their wealth or prosperity in their earthly lives. No. What has happened to these two men is more complex than that. Surely, it is a matter of piety, not prosperity or the lack thereof.

As for the rich man, what ailed him was not that he was rich, for Abraham had been rich, and Abraham is the very image of heaven in this parable. I mean, Lazarus journeys from one rich man to another, but they are different kinds of rich men, for Abraham is a man of faith, while this rich man now in torment could not have been a man of faith.

Again, the matter at issue is not prosperity, nor the lack of it, but rather piety. St. Paul's exhortation to wealthy Christians in this morning's Second Lesson provides a kind of summary of the Bible's attitude toward the rich. It is not that they should become poor, but rather that they should be faithful. And so, the Apostle teaches this:

<sup>17</sup>As for the rich in this world, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on uncertain riches but on God who richly furnishes us with everything to enjoy. <sup>18</sup>They are to do good, to be rich in good deeds, liberal and generous, <sup>19</sup>thus laying up for themselves a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life which is life indeed.(1 Timothy 6:17-19)

You remember, I bet you do, the saying from a few Sundays back about "entertaining angels unawares":

Be not forgetful to entertain  
strangers: for thereby some have  
entertained angels  
unawares.(Hebrews 13:2, KJV)

So, it seems to have been with Lazarus. The rich man did not know it, but a veritable son of Abraham lay at his doorstep. I do not mean simply that Lazarus was an Israelite, for the rich man was also an Israelite. I mean that Lazarus was a good man dear to heaven. When he dies, he goes home to the very bosom of Abraham. The passersby did not know, but one of heaven's giants seems to have lain in their path.

As so, I take this parable to be a warning about a certain kind of forgetfulness: I mean, forgetfulness about God.

The rich man in this story had time and opportunity to read the Bible. He had time to go to the Temple. He had time to hear of God's affection for the poor. This Sunday's Psalm, for example, had doubtless been recited in the Temple in the days of the rich man as it is recited in Church in our day and age. Listen to what it says about the nature of God:

[the Lord] executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free; <sup>8</sup>the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous. <sup>9</sup>The LORD watches over the sojourners, he upholds the widow and the fatherless; but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.(Psalm 146:7-9, RSV)

Or, as the KJV phrases this last verse:

The LORD preserveth the strangers;  
he relieveth the fatherless and widow:  
but the way of the wicked he turneth  
upside down.(Psalm 146:9)

That's what happened to the rich man: he was turned upside down.

In our earthly life, we have many things to concern us and to preoccupy us: Sometimes, we seem to have full measure of troubles, and

sometimes we have full measure of joy. But let us not forget our Lord. Let us not forget his compassion on the poor. Let us not forget his nature and what he believes in. Let us not be discouraged and think that there is nothing for us in this life except for some scraps of food and dogs gathering around. No, be not forgetful of Jesus, for he lives, and this changes everything.

Do you remember what I said about Lazarus and "entertaining angels unawares"? The idea is that though Lazarus was a poor man, easily overlooked, he nonetheless was a great man in the eyes of heaven. And the tragedy of the rich man is that he failed to entertain this angel unawares.

In our world, surely there are similar Lazaruses lying at the gate. One of them, I suggest, is the North-Western Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania.

Today congregations all around the Metro New York Synod are celebrating Udugu Sunday. "Udugu" means partnership or companionship, and in our case it refers to the official companionship relation between the North-Western Diocese and the Metro New York Synod.

The Lutheran church in Tanzania is a church very dear to my wife's heart. Carol spent six weeks in Tanzania a few years back, learning about our companion diocese there and working with the Cathedral parish of the diocese. Afterwards, she hosted one of the Tanzanian pastors who came to New York to study.

Now you might know that Tanzania is one of the poorest countries in the world. Many people there live on less than a dollar a day. Some still live in homes made of sticks and mud with grass roofs, dirt floors and little or no furniture. Many have neither electricity nor running water. They gather whatever they can to make a fire to cook their food. They carry water long distances and have to boil it before they can use it. Malaria and AIDS are serious problems.

Carol tells me that the amazing thing about the Tanzanians she met, poor as they are, is that they have a very strong sense of God's providence. One morning, for example, she said, "Isn't it a beautiful day?" and her Tanzanian friend responded, "Yes! God has given us a beautiful day." It is not simply that there is a

beautiful day, but that *God* has given us this beautiful day.

All the time she would hear people say, “Oh I thank God so much!” And, since they knew that life was fragile – but in God’s hands – they would say, “If God wishes.” “I’ll come tomorrow, if God wishes.” Their faith is strong – their gratitude to God is ever-present. We could learn from their example.

The Lutheran Church in Tanzania is a joyful, Bible-believing church filled with good deeds. Let me speak of one of them. It is a ministry of the North-Western Diocese called “Huyawa.” It is an African word built on the words “women and children.” It is a ministry to victims of AIDS.

It is a classic kind of social ministry for the church. That is, the church is trying to fill-in the gaps of governmental service. When there is no one else to help, the church is helping. The Huyawa program has four components:

- + Education, including schools for the children.
- + Health Care, including testing and treatments.
- + Legal Rights Department, for it is a world in which women have reduced legal rights and could be dispossessed of what little they have by male relatives of the husband who has died.
- + Social care Department, including care for orphans and training for social workers.

To those of us who have some familiarity with the financial reports of American institutions, like year-end reports from mutual funds or even the financial reports for congregations or synods, there is a humbling kind of detail in the reports of Huyawa. They report, for example, on the number of school uniforms they have been able to buy for the orphans, for having clothes is not to be taken for granted in Africa.

I know Bishop Elisa Buberwa of the North-Western Diocese. I have met him, I have corresponded with him, and our congregation has sent money to that Diocese for many years now by way of our benevolence budget. And I hope you will be pleased by that.

The good Lord has blessed many of us with some prosperity and has likewise blessed our congregation with peace and stability. Let us be like the people of whom St. Paul wrote: Let us do good, be rich in good deeds, liberal and generous, thus laying up for ourselves a good foundation for the future, so that we may take hold of the life which is life indeed, through the grace and merits of Jesus Christ, who though he was rich, he made himself poor, that we might be rich in all things. Amen.