

Sermon #1,271: Luke 16:19-31 (Historic Gospel)
6-18-17, 1st Sunday After Trinity, Bethany-Princeton MN

FAITH COMES ONLY FROM HEARING GOD'S WORD

The Text, Luke 16:19-31 (v. 29-31). ²⁹“Abraham said to him, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.’ ³⁰And he said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ ³¹But he said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.’ ”

Lord, this is Your Word and these are Your words. Sanctify us by the truth. Your Word is truth. Lord, keep us from the foolishness of the rich man which imagines that faith can exist apart from Your Word. Lead us always to receive our faith from Your Word, and have it formed by Your Word. Then our faith will truly be a shield in battle to protect us from all the fiery darts of the wicked one. Amen.

Dear fellow redeemed in Christ: Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

This story that Jesus tells shows that not everybody goes to heaven. He tells a story about two men; one of them goes to heaven when he dies, and one of them goes to hell when he dies. Jesus makes that very explicit.

Lazarus goes to heaven and the rich man goes to hell. But why? Did the rich man go to hell for being such an arrogant selfish jerk? Did Lazarus go to heaven because God loves poor people more, or because he was a humble, patient man who never hurt anyone? No. They were both wicked sinners. The difference, as the rest of the Bible explains, is faith. The main teaching of the Bible is that a sinner is justified – declared holy and righteous by God – by grace, for Jesus’ sake, through faith alone.

You know John 3:16: *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son ...”* Right after that, Jesus said: *“He who believes in Him is not condemned, but he who does not believe is condemned already” (Jn 3:18).* So Lazarus, who was carried to heaven, wasn’t condemned for his sins and had everlasting life, since he believed in the promised Savior. The rich man went to hell, condemned for his sins – but not because they were worse sins in God’s sight. It was because he didn’t believe.

It may sound strange, but nobody goes to heaven or to hell for what they do. You go to heaven, or you go to hell, because of what you believe or don't believe. If your sins condemn you to hell, it is because you do not get rid of them through repentance and faith. Everyone in heaven is there, not for doing anything good but by faith in Jesus. The question is: How do we obtain this faith? The rich man has an idea! Send someone back from the dead –send Lazarus – do a spectacular special effect, give people an unforgettable warning about hell that'll scare 'em straight. He gives this recommendation to heaven, to Abraham.

The answer that Jesus gives (in the words of Abraham) is the answer to how true faith is obtained: **“They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.”** The Bible in Jesus' time often was just called “the Law and the Prophets.” Their Bible was the Old Testament. Some people think the Old Testament is just a bunch of laws. But that's not the case. Jesus spoke of the things *“written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me” (Lk 24:44)*. So the Old Testament is about Christ! It prepared God's people for the Messiah. Moses, David, Isaiah, and all the other divinely inspired authors of Old Testament books have one purpose: to give promises about Christ and His salvation.

So, **“Let them hear Moses and the Prophets,”** is a great promise for all people. Because contained in Moses and the Prophets, and fulfilled in the Gospels, is the only thing that can make you rich and bring you to heaven: the righteousness that is found in Jesus and given to you in His Word. To obtain faith, Jesus is saying, you hear God's Word. This is a promise: hearing God's Word will produce faith.

Faith in Jesus comes only from hearing God's Word. Faith is produced by the Holy Spirit working through His Word and Sacraments. This is what we Lutherans say in the Augsburg Confession: *“That we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given, who works faith ... in those who hear the Gospel.”*

This is based on solid Scripture. There are a few main Bible verses to highlight, that teach this. In Isaiah 55, God says: **“My Word shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it,”** namely, to produce faith. Then come

two important verses about this in Romans: first, Romans 1:16, *“the Gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes,”* in other words, the Gospel – the good news about Jesus – has power from God to produce the true faith; and Romans 10:17, which says it so clearly: *“Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”*

But even though this is so clear, the human heart does not want to believe it, and there is all kinds of evidence of this all around us – and even inside us. The most obvious evidence is that people fall away from attending church, where God’s Word is preached. Then they want to claim that they are still believers. This is having faith in *faith*, more than having faith in *Christ*, who can only be known in His Word. They think someone who didn’t attend church should still be considered a believer. People think if they were once baptized and confirmed they just keep faith even if they totally neglect it. People say they can stay at home and still be a Christian. They have time for everything else but hearing God’s Word.

You also have to deal with your Old Adam that doesn’t want to listen to God, and treats the world’s wisdom and what is popular with others as being an equal authority – or even superior to God’s Word. We get bored with God’s Word. We think we know it all and need something more exciting. We think we have to help make God’s Word real. This is where the temptations to make church “more relevant to youth” or “more exciting” come from. Another version of this is criticizing sermons as “dry and boring.” Instead of asking, *“Is it faithful to God’s Word?”* the sinful heart asks: *“It has to be more exciting or I won’t go.”* It’s another version of: **“If one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.”**

Isn’t it amazing how the thinking of unbelief can sometimes bully the church and drive how Christians think, when we should know better? To think that the message of God’s Word has to be changed in order to appeal to unbelievers, or for evangelism to succeed, is so wrong! Imagine, here hell (the formerly rich man) tells heaven (Abraham and Lazarus) how to do its business of converting his unbelieving brothers!

This is what happens when you get away from God’s Word. When people keep away from Word and Sacrament, they make themselves vulnerable to losing the faith. Their faith is not being formed by God’s Word.

They open themselves up to their faith being formed by messages that contradict God in His Word. This is why you can't keep your faith, apart from God's Word. Apart from hearing the Word, faith will die; it will consist of what makes sense to human reason, contrary to God. True faith isn't general or generic faith in God, it's specific. It's faith in Jesus.

The most critical element of this is to recognize that God's love is contained in His Word. This is how He wants to take care of people. He does not want anyone to end up like the rich man in hell. He takes no pleasure in people despising His Word, like the rich man and his brothers. The whole purpose of God's Word is to forgive sinners. It is inherently pastoral. The purpose is not just to give information. The purpose is to bless, so as to remove the curse of sin. The purpose is to give your Savior to you. The purpose is to save so that you will not be condemned.

So when someone is resisting God's Word they're being deprived - depriving themselves - of this love of God. What the "rich man" proposes in hell is inherently unloving. Hell cannot love. Not only did he not want to waste his time with God's Word - and look where it got him! - he still doesn't want his family members to waste their time with it either. He is depriving them of God's love as revealed in His Word. God's love isn't revealed to you in heaven without first coming to you in the Word.

The picture of Lazarus in heaven tells us this: "**Now he is comforted,**" Abraham says. It is this word *comfort* that describes the true faith. This comfort is not for heaven only. On earth it is whatever gives consolation to the sinner who is troubled by sins, the devil, and death. So we pray to be comforted in life and death. How can it happen? Through the Word.

So what is this Word of God that creates the true faith? It is in the truest sense the Gospel, the message of God's love in Jesus Christ. It is the word of promise. It is the word of forgiveness. Our Lutheran Confessions say that what God does through His Word is forgive sins: "*Justification happens through the Word.*" That's what God is doing, all the time, with His Word: justifying us, through His Word forgiving sinners, first declaring you forgiven and at the same time working in you the faith that receives this forgiveness, so you believe it.

This brings us to my favorite Luther quote in the Large Catechism: *“Everything in the Christian Church is so ordered toward this goal: we shall daily receive in the Church nothing but the forgiveness of sin through the Word and signs [sacraments], to comfort and encourage our consciences as long as we live here. So even though we have sins, the grace of the Holy Spirit does not allow them to harm us. For we are in the Christian Church, where there is nothing but continuous, uninterrupted forgiveness of sins.”*

This is where faith lives. You want to have saving faith? You listen to the Gospel, and you train your ears to listen for this. True faith sees Jesus the Savior, listens for His voice. But God doesn't put pressure on us to believe. He only tells us to be where He Himself gives us this faith. We do as much work in producing faith as we do in producing a full tummy when we sit down to eat. All we do when the Word is preached is receive it. We are just to be where His Word is taught in its truth and purity. We are just to open our Bible and our catechism, to bring our babies to the baptismal font, to come to the Lord's Supper hearing Jesus' words, “for you.” We don't do the work. The Holy Spirit does it all.

Jesus' words put into the mouth of Abraham, **“If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded,”** are turned into a promise that the Gospel produces faith: **“If they [you!] hear Moses and the Prophets, they [you!] will be persuaded.”** This persuasion isn't robotic, as if going through the motions results in faith. Often it's a struggle to believe and overcome doubts, and the Holy Spirit seems to keep us with Christ “kicking and screaming” if you will, for we hardly want to walk the road of faith but want to see it all first, like Thomas. But this is a promise: that whenever we are hearing God's Word, the Holy Spirit will be there, working to create faith in our hearts. Amen!