

PR21.C

18th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
September 30, 2007

Amos 6:1a, 4-7
1 Timothy 6:6-19
St. Luke 16:19-31

Luke 16:19-31

¹⁹“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²²The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’ ²⁵But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. ²⁶Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’ ²⁷He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house—²⁸for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ ²⁹Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ ³⁰He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ ³¹He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

People are often anxious for God to give them a sign. It would be a close call to know if people would rather know God’s will for their lives or to have a sign so they could be sure.

Certainty is sometimes more attractive than knowledge. People have always been anxious for God to prove himself. And if he proves himself in an agreeable way – so much the better.

We want God to *make* us believe in him. Usually, when we ask for signs they are completely outside of our experience – unless you count reading about them in those newspapers they sell in the checkout lines at the grocery store.

If the only way we can believe in God is to see something that doesn’t exist – then we trust our salvation to imaginary wonders. That seems like a poor place to rest our relationship with God.

Just as we cannot be forced into love (as we all know to be the case), we cannot be shocked into belief. Strong-arm tactics do not bring us into a relationship with God, and God does not use strong-arm tactics.

Miracles of a spectacular, unexpected variety can startle us, open our eyes, make us ask questions and look for answers. But we do not base our relationship with God on supernatural wonders.

We base our faith on day to day living in the presence of the word of God, doing his will in the **ordinary** business of our lives. **That's** faith.

God's really great miracle is the constancy of his love for us. His great power is not demonstrated when he does something we never heard of before. God's great power is demonstrated in what he does all the time. His constant love and care in our lives, the everyday relationship with God. He's always here. He never leaves us.

We need a "faith producing miracle". We won't find it in the fireworks of a once-in-a-lifetime showstopper. A truly "faith producing miracle" is the love God has for us everyday, the miracle we get used to.

The rich man in Jesus' parable this morning wanted a flashy miracle to jar his brothers into faith. It was too late for the rich man to live in a relationship with God, but he wanted Lazarus to go back to his brothers and warn them. The rich man said, "Then, father, I beg you to send (Lazarus) to my father's house – for I have five brothers – that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment." Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.'" In other words, the message you are trying to give your brothers so they will have faith is already clear and available. There's no secret here. If anyone asked your brothers what God wants them to do, they would be able to answer

correctly. They know all about God wanting them to be just to the poor. They know about charity and generosity. **The message has already been delivered.**

The scripture goes on to read: The rich man answered, “No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

The rich man was concerned with the **message**. It just wasn’t spectacular enough to be convincing. It was just ordinary things we hear every day. The same old stuff about making the most of the gifts God gives us, simple statements about all of us being brothers and sisters.

We’re **used** to that message. We think we’ve got to come up with a splashier message that will grab some attention.

But God is quite happy with his message, thank you. God is concerned with the people who **hear** his message. **They** could use some strengthening.

The message of God’s love and a life lived showing God’s love and doing justice and bringing God’s peace...**that message is clear**. God shouts it from a hundred different directions every day. The concern is for who hears the message and responds. The rich man had the message. Moses and the prophets were available. As an added reminder a poor man lay at his gate everyday, wishing he had just the food that the rich man threw away. The **message** was clear enough. The problem was the **hearer**.

The rich man said, “I must not have ever known. Maybe if you had given me some sign...It’s not too late for my brothers. Give them something that will convince them.” But the message is clear and we have all the signs and wonders we can use. We don’t have to look very far past our own front gates to see people in poverty. We see chances to serve God every time we can reach out, every offering plate that’s passed in front of you, every opportunity to

learn, every chance you have to say something kind. **It's up to us to respond.** God's message is a clear call to do what he wants. We hear it over and over. **It's ordinary.** We can't go a full step in any direction without experiencing God's love and grace.

People get used to being loved by God. People often ask to be startled. We want something unheard of – but God chooses his own signs.

He gives us the sacraments. That's where he told us to look for him. He comes to each of us in baptism – marking us with his cross, calling us his. We are marked and we are **always** his. Not just when signs and wonders are flying around and people are ecstatic and mighty works are crackling through the heavens – we are his everyday. When we make a difference in the world...and when we fail. And when we just live through the routine for another twenty-four hours. We are always his, because he holds us.

He comes to us in the sacrament of the altar – giving us strength to do the things he wants. The sacraments are the signs and wonders that Christ has given us. More of a miracle than if the revived corpse of Lazarus brought a message of God's will to the rich man's brothers.

God continues to come to us with signs and wonders that will startle us.

We just have to be able to recognize a miracle when we see one. Just because they happen all the time doesn't make them any less miracles. Really it makes them **more** miraculous.

We stand with the rich man and say, "God, if you would just send a **powerful** sign – I'm sure everyone would hear your message and do your will."

God's answer is the same as ever. "I've told you and told you. You had Moses. You had the prophets. The message calls for faithful life day to day. And you want the flash and excitement of something unusual."

God is with us **everyday**. Standing at your elbow, speaking in your ear what he wants you to do with your life.

We know heroes, men and women who never seem to be troubled. Who always seem to do what God wants. People out of history who have shaped the future. People who live here with us today, whom we know personally and admire because of their peace of mind and the grace they bring into the world around them. **The usual theory is those people have been given an extra measure of faith.** As if God gave those people extra strength he didn't give the rest of us. God probably let those people in on some real faith-strengthening miracle. **But God doesn't give people extra miracles to build faith.** Some people just know how to recognize miracles when they see them. Some people see a chance to serve and they know it for the miracle that it is. They grasp that sign and make it part of their faith. A chance to be generous or kind or patient. A chance to worship their creator every Sunday. Miraculous signs from God.

We receive signs that are as powerful as signs get – but sometimes we just sit with our four living brothers – missing the dead one – and wonder what we should do.

Abraham told the rich man his five brothers would not believe even if someone were to rise from the dead. And a lot of people don't. Jesus rose from the dead and yet, some people can't find any faith.

God has spoken clearly. Any problem is a problem with the hearers. Miracles are not startling flashes that shock us into faith, like an ex-corpse making a house call to warn the five brothers to be good.

Miracles come about in day after day life – lived with God.

Not the flash of an instant – but the relationship of a lifetime.

Real miracles are what happen with such routine constancy that we can miss them if we're not careful. Not just baptism, but a person living in baptism. Maturing in faith and service. Not just eating and drinking the bread and wine for a moment, but life lived as a person who is in the real presence of Christ.

And the miracle of the resurrection is not that one moment when Jesus walked out of the tomb. The miracle of the resurrection unfolds everyday as Christ goes about the business of living in his body, the church.

The miracle is not that he got up from the dead – once. It is that he defeated death. It's not that Jesus came to life – to shock everybody. **The miracle is Jesus goes on living.**

God's message is as clear as it ever was. It is up to his hearers to know where to listen for the message.

We can't sit, staring, waiting for God to shock us with a bolt of lightning and a thunderous voice, or some cosmic slight of hand. Jesus Christ has accomplished the miraculous and defeated death. He's calling us to be a part of the miracle.

Will people believe "Even if someone should rise from the dead?" Let's rise from the dead and find out. Let's give our lives as part of Christ's living body doing his work and bringing his love.

Christ was dead and now he's alive in us. God has never stopped working miracles. Even rising from the dead – and giving **us** the miracle of life.