

25 September 2022 – Luke 16:19-31 (Proper 21)

Are you a “dog lover?” (Not just bulldogs!) I am! Sadly, the Bible is not ‘dog friendly.’ In the Scriptures, dogs are considered unclean scavengers, hardly better than pigs. In Jewish tradition people were forbidden to keep any but guard dogs. There is only one exception to this negative view, and it is today’s Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. A small word makes the difference. The phrase, ...*even the dogs would come and lick his sores*, is better translated, ...*but the dogs would come and lick his sores*. The Greek word usually denotes contrast. This may seem insignificant, but it isn’t.

The first person in the story is excessively rich, wearing purple and fine linen, feasting every day. Purple cloth was obscenely expensive. The detail about his fine linen is humorous, referring to his underwear: he is so pampered even his undies are offensively delicate and costly. Jesus paints a word-picture of someone self-absorbed, coddled, excessive, vain, and impious.

Obviously, there is a stark contrast with the sickly beggar at the rich man’s gate, wanting scraps. What he longs for are not just table crumbs. The ancients used pieces of bread like napkins, to clean their fingers during and after eating, and then throw the used bread on the floor. This is what Lazarus hopes for. This is the only parable in which a character is named. Lazarus means, ‘the one whom God helps.’ While we are to see the contrast between the rich man and Lazarus, there is a deeper contrast. The rich person gives him nothing, but even despised dogs lick his sores.

Dogs lick their own wounds, and lick as a sign of affection. Even more, in the first century dog saliva was believed to have curative properties, as indeed it does. Recent scientific study discovered that saliva contains “endogenous peptide antibiotics,” which aid healing. The dogs licking Lazarus’ wounds are not a further sign of neglect or torment; the dogs are another contrast to the rich person. The dogs minister as they can to the poor man while the obscenely wealthy dilettante mollicoddles himself in a narcissistic stupor.

Jesus then shifts the scene to the afterlife. It is tempting to see this simply as role reversal: the self-obsessed rich in this world will suffer in the next; the suffering poor now will know peace and happiness. Again, something deeper: the rich guy has not changed at all, even in Hades: he still makes demands, expects to be served, still views Lazarus as an inferior who should wait on him; there is no remorse, no guilt, no admittance of wrong. He cannot ‘connect the dots’ of culpability in his indifference to others’ suffering. Even when his own relief is denied, he demands Abraham and Lazarus give warning, but just to his family.

It is tempting to view Abraham’s answer in the story—*If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead*—as an example of divine justice, that wealth and greed are as heretical as active denial. Such interpretations are apt. Yet again, let’s go deeper.

In Greek the word translated “to save” also means “to heal.” This is likely why there are so many healing stories in the New Testament. Salvation and healing are inseparable; grace is not so much a ticket into heaven as healing from the wounds of sin, sins inflicted on us and sin we inflict on others and ourselves. Grace heals sin for service.

When we show kindness to those in sickness, need or necessity—what was once called doing works of mercy—we help others in their suffering and assist our own healing. To be merciful, show pity, and act with charity turns us from death to resurrection. To be self-absorbed, self-indulgent, and selfish brings spiritual death. Works of mercy and charity are as much about one’s own healing as someone else’s. Mercy puts into practice Paul’s admonition: *Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus* (Philippians 2:5); and: *If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit* (Galatians 6:8); Jesus says in Matthew 7: *Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven* (v21). And Matthew 5:42: *Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you*. Practicing mercy is sharing God’s grace to the suffering and heals those who are merciful.

Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive be yours, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, now and for ever. Amen.