

Luke 16:19–31

James Nestingen · CROSS Talk

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In the text for Pentecost 19, Christ Jesus takes on the smug, the secure in themselves. But he still has a good word for the rest of us, so if we hang in tight we'll get a blessing. Of course, I suppose that's a sure sign of trouble. The smug are always other people; it couldn't be us. The problem is that we do not see ourselves clearly. Just when we are most self-preoccupied and self-absorbed, we think we're absolutely in touch with everybody, and when we think we're in touch with everybody, there we are, stuck on ourselves. But if we're careful, I think we can hear this word for the smug, and Christ Jesus will move us beyond self-preoccupation. He will liberate us from ourselves, and he'll do it by speaking a word in our hearing.

There's a beauty here. Generally, Jesus is at his most ruthless with the self-absorbed. We've seen this before: people who think of themselves as beyond the Word, or superior to the Word, or having something above the Word, generally become targets, and when they become targets, Jesus plays hardball. He gets tough. He can be pretty nasty, and this gospel is no exception. Here we have the rich man, Dives, as he has been called from the Latin translation. We find him in hell, trying to find some way to keep cool in the flames, and expecting Lazarus to leave Abraham's bosom and all the comforts of paradise and descend into hell so that the rich man can suck on his finger. How do you like that? I'd say that's playing tough. We'll take a close look at this text when we get to it.

The Supporting Texts

But Jesus has some significant assistance in the supporting texts today. First of all, he's got Amos. If there was ever a prophet who loved to beat up the smug, it's Amos, and he's really after his people today. He's going to give them a ride and wake them up a little. If that's not enough, we've got Psalm 146. I don't think David is the author of this psalm, because there's usually some tip-off to David, but the psalmist sure knows the ways of power and the limits of power. Maybe that bespeaks some kingly experience, who knows. But he knows this: the Lord is more reliable than kings, even the best of them. And if Amos and the psalmist aren't

enough, we've got Paul, ready to take on the bishops. Power is in play here, and that's reminder enough that there are bishops or district presidents, or whatever you might call them, around. So Paul is going to give the bishops a lesson. Lots of fun. And as long as he has the bishops lined up, he's going to go after the deacons too.

So we'll work with these supporting texts first, and then we'll take on the story of Dives and Lazarus, the rich man and Lazarus, as that wonderful text unfolds.

Amos: Woe to Those at Ease in Zion

Amos leads off, as we say. "Woe to those who are at ease in Zion, and to those who feel secure on the mountain of Samaria, the notable men of the first of the nations, to whom the house of Israel comes!" Both parts of the country are his target. "Pass over to Calneh, and see, and from there go to Hamath the great; then go down to Gath of the Philistines. Are you better than these kingdoms? Or is their territory greater than your territory, O you who put far away the day of disaster and bring near the seat of violence? Woe to those who lie on beds of ivory and stretch themselves out on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock and calves from the midst of the stall, who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp and like David invent for themselves instruments of music, who drink wine in bowls and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph! Therefore they shall now be the first of those who go into exile, and the revelry of those who stretch themselves out shall pass away."

You can crank up on that one, I think. You can see these people stretched out on beds of ivory, preening themselves, purring, enjoying the stereo, cranking it up so they're not bothered. Amos is scolding. He goes after the leaders of the nation, who he believes have betrayed the covenant. They have not kept faith. He has the whole indictment he's been reading, and he's after them.

To those who think they are secure, he recommends a little field trip. Calneh and Hamath the great are both towns in Syria that were noted for their great wealth, and of course they have come to ruin. Gath of the Philistines, the same thing: a powerful city down on the coast, south of Amos's normal territory, and they have gone into trouble. "Are you better than these kingdoms? Or is their territory greater than your territory?" These people have experienced disaster. You're not immune to it yourself.

And now here we go. He gives us a verbal picture of smugness. That's lots of fun, except it comes a little too close to home. I like my music, as you know, and I listen almost constantly to

classical radio. “Woe to those who lie on beds of ivory and stretch themselves out on their couches.” Feels pretty good, doesn’t it? “And eat lambs from the flock and calves from the midst of the stall.” They like the choice meat. “Who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp and like David invent for themselves instruments of music”; one translation has “like David, improvise.” These are people who not only enjoy music but like to play with it and get lost in the sound of it. “Who drink wine in bowls and anoint themselves with the finest oils.” Always looking after themselves. “But are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph.” They have no sensitivity, no conscience in relation to the ruin of Joseph.

“Therefore.” Here comes the threat. If this doesn’t alert the smug to their smugness, probably nothing will, and in fact it didn’t, did it? They went into exile. “Therefore they shall now be the first of those who go into exile, and the revelry of those who stretch themselves out shall pass away.” I might like to watch this happen to someone else. I suppose I could name some people who would be good candidates for this treatment. But I’m afraid we’re exposed, and Amos is exposing us, so that we hold fast to the Word and don’t get lulled to sleep.

Psalm 146: Put Not Your Trust in Princes

Now if Amos isn’t enough, and he usually isn’t, although he’s always fun, we’ve got this wonderful song, Psalm 146: “Hallelujah! Praise the Lord, O my soul! I will praise the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God while I have my being.”

I spent the weekend with some dear friends of mine up in Olympia, Washington. They are great characters, and they just love songs of praise. We had a rousing service on Sunday morning. The songs of praise were practically ecstatic; the kids had their own band, and the whole place was rocking and reeling. The fascinating thing about praise, of course, is that it takes you outside yourself. “O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall show forth your praise.” If you open my lips, then praise will come forth. But if I open them, you’re taking your chances. It’s likely to be self-justification and explanations and defenses and all the rest of it. When you praise, you forget yourself and get caught up in the other. So we call upon ourselves and our souls to praise the Lord. We praise the Lord as long as we live. We sing praises to God while we have our being. What a beautiful beginning.

Now come the admonitions. “Put not your trust in rulers, nor in any child of earth, for there is no help in them.” This is a good word for this political season in the U.S. People all over the country are complaining that the two available candidates are not much of a choice at all.

Some are happy with one, some with the other, but lots are happy with neither, so lots of people are saying they're going to vote no this year. Well, this is par for the course in the good Lord's eyes. Put not your trust in princes. The very best ones, whom we see on rare occasions, are worth turning to for a little help sometimes, but generally princes are a disappointment.

And here's the explanation the psalmist offers: "When they breathe their last, they return to earth, and in that day their thoughts perish." All the plans and projects, all the dreams of self-transcendence, all the resolutions and acts and all the rest of it, are touched by death. When the day of death comes, it all goes into the grave. It's dead; it's gone.

Now here's the contrast. I always love this. "Happy are they who have the God of Jacob for their help, whose hope is in the Lord their God, who made heaven and earth, the seas, and all that is in them." He is creator; he has made it all. And this is what we know about the God we meet in Christ Jesus: he keeps his promises. With politicians, you wait and hope, and when they miss a promise you just say, "Well, that's the way politics is." But you never have to worry about the God of Jacob. He keeps his promise forever. He has made a promise to you, and he meets you in that promise. He made it in your baptism. He makes it at the table. He has made it in the preaching of his Word. And when he makes a promise, he keeps it, so you can trust him with it.

"Who gives justice to those who are oppressed, and food to those who hunger." Everybody else has a plan or a project that will someday result in help for the oppressed or food for the hungry. He doesn't talk about it; he does it. "The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind; the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous; the Lord cares for the stranger; he sustains the orphan and widow, but frustrates the way of the wicked." What a great song. So here's good reason why we can trust the good Lord more than we trust princes. We can trust princes insofar as they honor the good Lord and stay under his thumb, but as soon as they start venturing out on their own, there is injustice aplenty and all kinds of difficulty.

And I missed the last words of the psalm: "The Lord shall reign for ever, your God, O Zion, throughout all generations." How's that? From everlasting to everlasting, into all eternity. And so we say a heartfelt hallelujah. What a lot of fun.

Paul: Bishops and Deacons

So Amos has come to be our alarm clock, and the psalm has come to expose our rulers and show us who is really trustworthy. And now who should come up to bat but the apostle Paul. Though he tried to butt in before the psalm was done, he gets his turn, and we get this wonderful reading from 1 Timothy 3:1–13.

We should remind ourselves right from the beginning that when Paul uses the term “bishop,” he is not talking about the structures of the church as we know them. As we know bishops, they are regional officers, bishop of here, there, or anywhere. But in this case bishops are senior pastors of parishes in the central cities. Augustine, for instance, was the bishop of Hippo, and Ambrose the bishop of Milan. These men were not regional church officials. They were local, and they ruled a smaller area, because they were senior pastors at the main parish in town. They had others under them: deacons, for instance, elders, and so forth. So a bishop here is not a regional official, as we tend to think of bishops or district presidents; he is more of a local authority. Either way, the message is pretty much the same.

“The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer.” We’ve got a generic term here, because different churches use different names. For years Lutherans in America referred to what are now called bishops as district presidents. I was talking to old David Preus, who was the president of the American Lutheran Church and part of the merger that became the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. He quoted one of his friends as saying, “We called them district presidents, then we started calling them bishops, and now they think they are.” Their heads got a little inflated, and I think you can see that in some of the things that have happened to the church ever since. They’re the ones who led us into this mess. By making the Scripture into a book of multiple choice, they decided that the Scripture was ambiguous on key sexual issues so that they could substitute their own teaching, and when they got by with that, they started throwing out the people who disagreed with them. How does that work? The church of tolerance becomes intolerant of its own people and finally has to exclude those who have the courage to disagree.

So it’s a good thing the apostle Paul shows up and gives us this word. We could paraphrase that beautiful psalm: put not your trust in bishops. The good Lord is reliable; with the bishops, you’re taking your chances. But we can look at how Paul understands this office, and it’s really fun. He gives instructions to both bishops and deacons, and they’re good ones.

“If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.” It’s a good thing that people desire this office. If they knew what was actually involved, they might flee it. In fact, in the early days of the church, the only way you became a bishop was by force. Augustine was captured by the congregation and forcibly installed, and so was Ambrose. That’s the way it worked in those days. If you desired the office, it was proof positive that you were not trustworthy. Paul doesn’t say that, though. He says it’s a good thing. If you think you have the stuff to do the job, that’s worth thinking about.

“Therefore an overseer must be above reproach.” This is the first thing. We don’t want somebody who has something to hide, something to cover, something he is trying to keep from the eyes of the parishioners. “The husband of one wife.” Paul is speaking of males, of course. The husband of one wife is not someone who has been out looking for the alternatives, but someone who is faithful. “Sober-minded”: not given to foolishness, not carried away with this, that, or every other thing. “Self-controlled”: somebody who can keep his temper, who can keep his mouth shut when he has to, who doesn’t blab confidences all over the place.

“Respectable”: somebody trustworthy, who conducts himself in such a way that people appreciate and honor him. “Hospitable”: somebody who welcomes the stranger, who welcomes those who stand along the outside, who sees a strange face in church and goes up and says, “I don’t know you, but you’re welcome here.” “Able to teach”: someone who knows the truth of the Word well enough to give instruction and ground people in it.

“Not a drunkard.” Not somebody who is going to wake up in the morning trying to remember what happened the night before, or wake up several mornings in a row wondering about it. Somebody who can have a glass of wine without getting sloppy and foolish. “Not violent but gentle.” In the early days of my dad’s ministry, he had a member of his parish who became irksome, a man bigger than I am, and Dad took him out behind the church and taught him a lesson. He reasoned with him. That’s not recommended. Not at all.

“Not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.” You’ve seen them, as I have: these old pastors who have served all their lives and have been soaked in grace, who have become soft and pliable, yet strong enough to hold their own. When you see those men coming, you just give thanks for them. “He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church?” I remember, when I was a young pastor, visiting with one of my friends after we had watched the bishop give his wife a hard time. He said, “If he can’t take

care of his wife, how is he going to take care of me? How is he going to take care of the church?" One follows the other. If you can manage a household, including the hormonally challenged fourteen-year-old, you can handle the church as well.

"He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil." So this is a two-feet-on-the-ground, practical, considerate list of qualities. These are all things pastors should aspire to, senior pastors or assistants. We all hope to be shaped this way for our ministry, so that we can take pride in our work, rejoice in being heralds of God's Word, and go about our responsibilities in the parish expectantly.

Now that Paul has talked to the bishops, he talks to the deacons, who provide another kind of leadership in the life of the congregation. "Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things."

Growing up in the days when the church permeated the culture, I can remember all kinds of stories of pastors whose ministry was undone by the gossip of a wife who sat on the telephone and told tales out of school. That is just what the apostle Paul is concerned about. He doesn't have a special criterion for women; he knows what works.

"Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus." One way or another, leaders serving in the church are interpreted in the light of Christ Jesus. The behavior of the priest, the pastor, or the deacon is taken as a reflection on Christ himself. We all know the stories. So Paul has his feet down. He is getting right into the nitty-gritty of pastoral life and grounding us so that we can be of good service. It's a reasonable list, a down-and-dirty but basic set of requirements: dirty not in the sense of dirt, but in the sense of gritty. This is good stuff.

The Rich Man and Lazarus

Now, if the first three aren't enough, we have Christ Jesus, and he is going to come after this rich man hot and heavy.

The parable we had last week, the parable of the unrighteous manager, is one of the most difficult parables of all. Robert Capon, whom many of you know, has written a great book on the parables, and he considers it the most difficult of all. In comparison with the parable of the unrighteous steward, we now have a virtual cartoon. There is nothing ambiguous about the rich man, and nothing ambiguous about the status of Lazarus.

“There was a rich man who was clothed in purple.” That’s significant, because purple dye was made from a rare shellfish and was therefore extraordinarily expensive. We know about Lydia, who dealt in purple; a person could make a living from this dye. So a man clothed in purple would be wealthy. “Purple and fine linen.” And since we know the quality of the clothes he wears, you can guess what follows: “who feasted sumptuously every day.” We’ve been doing that. We brought home about fifteen pounds of king salmon from Olympia, and we’ve been feasting sumptuously ourselves. But we haven’t been wearing purple or fine linen, so it’s all right. We can get by with it.

So now we have the rich man, and now we have the poor man. “At his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man’s table.” If you go to Ethiopia or Tanzania or many places in the Southern Hemisphere, you can find people like this: poor people with little or nothing, lying there with a begging bowl or a cup, their appearance often marred by all kinds of skin troubles that are the result of a poor diet. This poor man was covered with sores. He desired to be fed on the leftovers.

“Moreover,” and here comes an even more pointed detail, “even the dogs came and licked his sores.” He is helpless, unable to defend himself, and the dogs come by and offer their own form of medication. They lick his sores.

“The poor man died,” and now things reverse, “and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom.” Some translations say “Abraham’s side.” I like “bosom.” It’s at least more ample and warm; “Abraham’s side” is not a lot of fun. Poor Lazarus has finally got some solace and comfort. He is carried into Abraham’s bosom.

“The rich man also died and was buried,” and what happens to him? He is in Hades, a kind of intermediate hell. There are several words for hell in Scripture; Hades is one of them and Gehenna is another. This is the hell of fire, as we are going to see shortly. “And in Hades, being in torment.” He’s getting it now. Christ Jesus is letting us see the rich man’s fate. “He

lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side.” Lazarus is basking in his bosom, comfortable and warm and blessed. He is in the place of honor.

And the rich man is so utterly self-absorbed that he thinks he can somehow maintain his privileges in hell itself. What kind of illusion is that? Here’s a man who apparently hasn’t got an ounce of sense. “And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me.’” It would have been a lot better if he had shown a better sense of timing. He could have called that out earlier, and he could have been helpful to Lazarus. But now he thinks he is in the same position in hell that he was on earth. “Send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue.” What a jerk. Let me suck his finger, can you imagine? “For I am in anguish in this flame.” Well, I guess that’s the way hell must be. He is thirsty, and he sees Lazarus up there feasting, so he thinks Abraham should deputize Lazarus to come and help him.

“But Abraham said, ‘Child.’” Not “little one,” but hapless one, one unable to defend himself: child. “Remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish.” The rich man thought he had it all coming. He was so caught up in prices and investments and all the rest of it that he walked by Lazarus day after day and didn’t even see him. In fact, he hoped not to see him. He saw Lazarus coming and averted his eyes so that he didn’t have to face this poor man. So the roles have turned. The rich man is in hell, and Lazarus is in what we call the catbird seat. Only it’s better than that; he is in Abraham’s bosom.

And Abraham continues: “And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed.” Notice how he includes Lazarus in the plural pronoun: between us and you. There should be a pointed finger there. “A great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.”

That’s not enough; the rich man still thinks he can make an argument. “And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house, for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.’” Finally the rich man has been pulled out of himself, at least far enough to see his own relatives. But he is still utterly self-absorbed. He can’t get beyond family, and he can’t get beyond the idea that he is in the power position even in hell and that Lazarus should be his servant. He is clueless; he is oblivious. It is strange, isn’t it? He got at least as far as his brothers, but he didn’t get as far as Lazarus.

Moses and the Prophets

Now comes the main point of the text, and it is as hard a word as you can hear, but beneath it there is an incredible promise. “But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’”

God has dressed himself. He has not come in his bare, naked way, as Luther used to say. He has come dressed in his Word. He has come dressed in the Decalogue, dressed in words of promise and words of law. They have Moses, and they have the prophets, who have explained and amplified. “They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.” In other words, God has come far enough out of hiding. They have heard enough; they can hear enough. They have been alerted, warned, challenged, summoned, commanded. “Let them hear them.”

We could say it this way: we have Christ Jesus. We have Christ Jesus, the one who is speaking in this text, who is himself God dressed in the flesh of a man, who comes as near to us as our own flesh and blood. We have his Word. That’s enough.

But the rich man still has an argument. “And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’” You can bet the whole congregation nodded knowingly when they heard that, for someone did go to them from the dead. Christ was raised, and he came speaking and promising and giving and blessing. “He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.’” Exactly. When the self becomes a prison, the prison bars don’t break.

So we pray. This is our hope and prayer: that God will send his Word to us, that he will do exactly what he is doing in this text, that he will break us open. Luther used to say there is a big difference between security and certainty. Security is self-enclosed. Security is for the smug. Security says, “I’ve got enough, and nothing can touch me.” Certainty rests in the promise of Christ Jesus, and so do we.

So the story comes to wake us up, to pull us out of ourselves and into the hearing of the Word, so that we can rest in Christ Jesus, not secure but certain, held in his promise and therefore confident even in the face of hell itself. What does Paul say? Nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” So our certainty stands, even amid all the insecurities of dealing with helpless and foolish rulers and bishops who think they can transcend themselves, the whole sorry lot of leaders who fail us. There is one who never does,

Christ Jesus, and so there is one upon whom we can rely with joy, expecting good, even when the heat is getting a little hot, even when we're a little apprehensive.

God keep you. This is a fun text. I would recommend that you hold on to your seat belt.

Questions and Answers

A question about eternal security.

That's exactly right, Alan. Eternal security is the sense that I am enclosed, and therefore beyond the need for certainty. Whenever you hear the word "security," you ask: What are you secure in? What makes you secure? Certainty always requires a preposition. You are certain of someone, or certain in someone, so certainty and faith go hand in hand. Security is the enemy, and eternal security particularly, because it replaces the promise with a claim. That's a great question.

An observation that we are simply to rest in Christ.

Absolutely. What's better than that? He has laid down his life for you, and so you can rest. It's just fabulous.

My friends, you've got a great text for this Sunday, and I wish you all the best. I pray for you regularly. God's peace to each of you.

SOURCE

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Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=63TtOMBRfbk>

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