

The Listening Church

Kenneth Korby

Luke 16:19–31

Greeting

Grace, mercy, and peace be to each of you and all of you from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord.

The Communion Prayer: Faith toward God, Love toward One Another

My dearly beloved brothers and sisters of our Lord Jesus Christ, that simple and magnificent prayer at the end of the divine service, after we have eaten and drunk the Lord's body and blood, sums up what this sermon is about. In fact, it sums up the Christian life. That by this heavenly gift we pray God to make us grow in faith toward Him and in fervent love toward one another. That is the form of the cross in the Christian life: faith toward God and love toward each other, and it is that that we desire to grow in. Well, that's what this sermon is about, and the sermons that come for these next days, next week, are going to be on this matter of listening to the Word of God and the growth in it.

That communion prayer is about the one who loved us and gave his life for us. Love, therefore, from God is both a speech and a deed, as is the blessed sacrament. It is the word and the act. They can never be divorced from each other.

If you have only words, you have blabbering nonsense or flattery. You've had enough of somebody telling you, "Love you, love you, love you," and then stab your back in the office. If there is no action, then the love is not in truth. For the love of God, the truth in which we are to love is the act of sacrificing His Son for us. This is how we know the love of God—that God sacrificed His Son. That is, Jesus did not save His own life. His life was willingly offered by Him in union with the Father, in the fullness of the Spirit, the Blessed Trinity at work, loving and unlovely, loveless, hateful, murderous people. That is what it is to love in speech, in word, and in truth.

So it is about that that we speak. That when we speak about trusting the love of God, faith [unclear], we are talking about listening. Faith is not self-generated. That you decide you're going to trust somebody.

Faith is always generated by what comes to you. A mother carries the child in her body. She gives birth to the child. There's a love that starts out there because she has given that, and she has received the child in an act of love from her husband. Always given, and therefore it is to be received. Faith is the receiving of that word we hear.

Israel at the Mountain: Afraid to Listen

The problem with the listening church is illustrated very clearly in Israel, the church. And next week I invite you to pay close attention to the family catechetical hours, because it's going to talk about the church again, listening to the word of God, and they, like the modern times, want to play it cool. Well, it's not cool to be cool about the word of God to study that for next week.

But today, Israel had very little choice. They were dragged out of slavery in bondage. They sat there and ate while death and wrath killed off people. They went through the Red Sea on dry ground, and the military might got confused, mucked down, and killed. They were standing there, astonished. All of the hatred in the world against them hadn't even touched them.

Now God takes them to the mountain and says, "I want to tell you something." And He gives the Ten Commandments. I am God; you are not. I am jealous. I get very angry when things don't go right with you and me, or with you and each other, I am jealous, and I don't want you to mess with my name. You know the truth and tell it. You know what you believe and pray it. Don't mess with my name. On the holidays, you make it holy. It's not for recovering from a hangover, or for [unclear] with the fish, or the rabbits, or the deers. It is for hallowing. You honor your father and mother. You do not murder. You do not steal. You do not commit adultery. You do not gossip or lie about your neighbor, and you don't keep wishing for things that other people have—house, husband, wife, children, job, honor, property, position, prestige. You don't keep wishing for it. I am God; you are not.

When the people heard these commandments, they were scared out of their breeches. They saw the lightning, the thunder, the smoke, things trembling. And God had said, "You put a fence around that mountain. Any animal or human being that touches it is dead." God does

not look like a nice God here, and the people drew back as God was talking, and then they cried out a prayer: “Let God not talk to us.” They’re asking God not to talk.

That’s one of the things that happens, you see, with the listening church, with the terror and the fear and the address that God makes. We don’t get closer to Him. We get frightened, crushed, burnt, driven back. And they say to Moses, “You talk to Him, and then tell us what He said. We’ll do what He says.”

So Moses already points to a mediator, to somebody who’s going to suffer the terror, to somebody who’s going to die the anger and kill it, to somebody who’s going to suffer the sin. He points to somebody else, and that’s what Abraham told the man in hell: “If they won’t listen to Moses and the prophets, then [unclear] are going to listen to someone who rose from the dead,” because Moses and the prophets preached about Jesus, who was crucified and rose from the dead. If they won’t believe Moses, they won’t believe Jesus. So Moses already is beginning to point.

The Law That Tests the Heart

There is a word of God that scares and kills—that is God’s law. These are not general moral principles. Everybody ought to live better. Of course, they ought to, but that’s not what the commandments are about.

Moses said, “God has come to test you.” He has put a stethoscope to your heart. He’s going to see what’s going on in there. How do you love God? How do you fear God? How do you trust God? How do you love your neighbor? How do you honor His Word? How do you pray? That’s what He’s looking for. He’s got a CAT scan going because He wants to find out where the cancer is and He wants you to know about it.

He’s come to test you, not to see whether you can bench press 450 pounds, but to do like a doctor does to see what your sickness is, because God wants to heal. God does not want you dead. Death is ugly and hateful to God. He is angry with death because death comes from sin, but what God wants to do, He wants to kill the dead, carry the sins, and give life.

For God is love. This is how the love of God is—that we know it. God gave His Son, who offered His life for us.

Jesus, the One Who Listened

So the fearful unwillingness to listen to God is one of the problems you have and I have. It's the problem of the listening church. Israel is a good illustration of it. For we think we're going to die, and we are. And we think, therefore, you've got to butter up God, buy Him, do something, get your ducks in a row, get religious, so that God will somehow or another be on your side.

And God says, "Phooey, that smells in my nostrils." That makes Him angry, because He wants things right, and when He wants them right, what He does is He gives that one man who does listen to Moses and the prophets, Jesus of Nazareth, that one Jew who was born for us, for you, for me. He was born in utter poverty. That is, he rested his soul in nothing but God his Father. That was his poverty. He didn't have anything else that he laid claim to, and he came for one thing—to do this fearful, awful thing that, in the face of the death-threatening law of God, he offered his life. For it is this that God came with the law to do, to test you. Do you trust me? And Jesus, abandoned by God and suffering the hostility of us all, trusted God to deliver him. And so the fear of God before Jesus gave Him joy in loving you and me, the unloved.

God's love never looks around in the world and finds all of the beautiful people and loves them, all of the potentially good people and loves them. God doesn't find that in the world. God makes us lovely by loving us. He gives us His righteousness. This is what God wants.

The Rich Man's Restless Rest: Greed

So that life-threatening law, that life-threatening word of God scares us, and we look for our security wherever we can get it. The handiest thing for security is what you own. The wealthy man's soul [unclear] rest in wealth alone. Now that was a restless kind of rest because he didn't know whether the market would go bad or whether Medicare would go broke. He didn't know whether the big [unclear] would hit him and then all his money would be for nothing anyway. He didn't know whether a bunch of brigands, some revolutionaries who had a big idea about how they were going to do good for the poor, would come and rob him. It was a restlessness, and yet that's where he rested. He was full and fat and rich in his wealth.

For this is the way the heart of sin faces God. It's called the sin of greed. Next Sunday you're going to hear of the sin of sloth, of laziness toward the Word of God, but today it's greed. A heart grabs what it can hold to find its security.

Now, don't sit so comfortably. Put all your little umbrellas up so as the water drifts off on your neighbor and none drifts on you. Don't sit quite so comfortably, because this wealthy man was no more wealthy than you are, you have cars, houses, life insurance, retirement plans, Medicare, Social Security. You have a home. You have groceries. Most of you have that all the time. So we're not talking about some filthy rich like the Kennedy [unclear].

What we're talking about is a heart, whether it has money or doesn't have money, that is always crazy, always greedy, always trying to get a hold of that security. That is the man who died. We don't even know his name. His God didn't even leave a name. Maybe it was "In God We Trust." No name.

That in hell he was wretched. Even in hell he wasn't satisfied with hell. What he had wanted no longer satisfies. He wanted some cool waters, too hot were he. Then he wanted to tell Abraham what to do. "Send somebody to my brother." Abraham answered him. Then he argues with Abraham. I mean, this man is just nothing but anger and hostility to God. He is discontent and argues with everything, and that's what greed does. What we [unclear]—it's never enough.

Cain: Anger at Worship

Cain is like that. It's a terrible story, the first consequences that Adam and Eve saw in their own kids, and how they must have cried at night, lying there by the fire, hugging each other and saying, "What did we do? What did we do? What did we do?" Because Cain went to church with his brother Abel. They were offering sacrifice, and Abel's sacrifice smelled good to God. Cain's didn't. Cain had a different heart, and when God spoke to him, Cain didn't become terrorized, brokenhearted, and cry out, "God, have mercy on me." He got angry. He killed his brother at worship.

We thought worship was just to feel nice. Worship can be full of anger, like some of you, or like some of us, I should say. The quiet anger that builds over the years of a marriage, for the neglect, for the abuse, for the belittling of each other, for the greed, quarreled to see who gets what—that anger—that is murder. Then God doesn't like that. God gets angry, except His anger is a holy anger. He gets angry because He wants us alive, not dead. Murderers don't have eternal life abiding in them.

Lazarus' Poverty: Resting in God Alone

Now, when the rich man saw what Lazarus had. He began to see something of what you see of poverty. Poverty here is not an economic term. Poverty is a term that describes Lazarus' incapability to put his security in anything that he had. He didn't have a green card for [unclear]. He didn't have a Social Security card for Medicare. He didn't get his check. He didn't have anybody bringing him food from the pantry. He had nothing. That is the poverty. His poverty was he had only one thing. His good was in God, whom He waited for.

Abraham said to the rich man, "You had all the goods you wanted in your life. Now you get the evil." Lazarus had no good in that life, not because he was economically depressed, but because his heart was somewhere else.

The poverty is a parable. It's not an economic level. Do we live on poverty level? It is a parable of those whose souls rest in God alone, like Jesus, owner of heaven and earth. When he was poor, he didn't even have a pillow until he was laid in somebody else's grave. He didn't have a resting place until he came to rest on the cross, for he had nothing else than God, and that is where the heart comes to rest.

Christ, the One Bridge across the Chasm

So the heart comes to rest in the one who built the bridge between across that great chasm. Besides, Abraham said, "There's a great chasm between us. Nobody can go from heaven to hell to help you out." You are a poor man. Your riches are your poverty. Nobody can go there, and nobody can go from hell to heaven as if to tear Christ away, except one, Christ. Christ alone is that bridge coming out of heaven to cross the gap to us, to our death and hell, and to go to hell as the conqueror, breaking hell and its bonds, setting you free, and going with you back to the Father.

"Look what I found when I was on earth." He said, "Look, this is what I am. I brought these to you." And God said, "Ooh, they're pretty. They're just right. They're just the way I want them," because they are in you.

Faith the Mother, Love Her First Child

So we are to listen to Moses and the prophets because Moses and the prophets talk about one who brought us from death into life, Jesus of Nazareth, and that is where love begins. This is

how we know love: that God gave His Son to us for us. He laid down His life for us. Faith is the mother that receives that, the womb that gets pregnant. It is where the seed of the Word of God grows, and the first child of that mother is love.

You have the signs of life, vital signs. What are they? The way you love each other. Now that doesn't mean merely say "Love you" and then turn around and drop it. That doesn't mean "Love you" and then forget about you. To love is to put your life there next to the other one to give it for the other.

This is particularly hard in the home where you have husband and wife. There's a lot of pain going on in both of them, and a lot of pain going on around them, and it's very hard when you have brothers and sisters because you always think the other one gets the better deal. There's a lot of pain in brothers and sisters when you go to worship or you are approved by your parents. Then one can get angry with the other: "How come it's not for me? How come it's always for her?" So that the practice of love toward each other is designed by God to be very simple in that situation in which you live. That's where you get your practice. That you are there to give your life for the other one, but the other one is there to give her life for you.

For love is to die, because when you love, you give your life away. Now you can make it look like love. A man can pay away so much money for a sexual act that he gets something back. It looks like an act of love. It's an act of prostitution where you give something in order to get it back. Our love gets like that. It's very corrupted. We love in order we can get something back. I'll be good, so they'll be good to me. I'll be nice, so they'll be nice to me. But that isn't quite the way love works.

This love that is born of God is born of the life of God. Faith is to be alive in God, and God's love by giving this life, God loves by making the beloved beautiful, and this is how we are to learn. This is the message: we are to love one another. All love doesn't end with the family; it can be very [unclear] and snobbish when it's just within the family, but it is the practice place so that love can be in the congregation, in the neighborhood.

Greed Makes Us Blind; Love Sees the Neighbor

The rich man was blind. Greed does that. He didn't even see Lazarus. He didn't even see Lazarus. Greed makes us blind. We have a society that is consuming itself with consumption, greed, say, and some don't even see the children, the teachers. They don't even see them. They don't even know they are there, unless they get in the way. Then they get knocked out away.

But where there is the love of God, where you can trust God to give you life from Jesus. There you can begin to see the neighbor, and when you see the neighbor, you will know what to do. You will do to the neighbor what you would like them to do for you.

The peace of the Lord Jesus be with all of you.

SOURCE

Kenneth F. Korby · 9 June 1996 · First Sunday after Trinity · Luke 16:19–31 (The Rich Man and Lazarus)

Transcribed from an audio recording of a sermon by Kenneth F. Korby (CTSFW Media). [unclear] marks words that could not be made out.