

September 29 2013

**Scripture Lessons ~ 1 Timothy 6:6-19, p. 1085**

*Luke 16:19-31, p. 956*

**Sermon**      *Fire Insurance*

**Why in the world is it that we human beings have to have that stuffing knocked clear out of us before we wake up and we smell the coffee. Before we wake up and realize the reality or importance or priority status of certain people in certain situations in our lives. Why in the world do we wait for a death in the family before we have a family reunion? Why do we wait until our Grandpa has Alzheimer's to try and find out what the family history is? Why does it take an illness before we really appreciate our health, or hunger before we know the importance of food, loneliness before we value the loved ones that we have around us?**

**Or why in Jesus' parable of the rich man in Lazarus's does it take a man's own death before he values living a life of kindness, mercy and generosity and love? This parable of Jesus is all too familiar to Ebenezer Scrooges in the Christmas carol by Dickens. In fact, Dickens who was a devout Christian may of fact may have received his inspiration from this very parable for that story. It is similar in that it has a sort of dream like quality and moral to the story. But it is different in the sense that instead of four spooks there is just one spook in this story and that spook is father Abraham who drives the point of the story home with the characters.**

**In addition, the parable gives us some insight into the Jewish view of the afterlife which was prevalent during the time of Jesus. As you remember the next life or even a resurrection didn't even figure prominently to Hebrew theology in much of the literature of the Old Testament. By the time of Jesus or maybe between the time of the New Testament and the Old Testament there was some thought of what was called the pit by the Psalmists was not the end of live but really the beginning of the next life. So rather than rewards and punishments only for this life there was some thought there might be some sort of day of reckoning in the next life based on how one lived one's life in the present day.**

**And so a sort of heaven and hell is portrayed in this parable and Father Abraham almost becomes for us the St. Peter of our modern day jokes that we tell of who is getting into heaven and who isn't. But far from driving his ears towards what I call fire insurance that is some sort of guarantee or some sort of hedging of bets that we will be on the right side of our Father Abraham when we get to the next life I don't think the point of Jesus' parable here has anything to do whatsoever with the reality of heaven and hell.**

Though the story might be a catalyst someday for the discussion of the existence of both places in a physical sense, instead, like Charles Dickens in the words of the ghost of Christmas Past, we are told here to beware for I speak of your reclamation, in other words the point of the parable is to get us to think about where we are in life right now and whether we are living the life we are called to live as followers of Jesus Christ. And if not, how will we change, how will we grow, how will we reclaim the lives for our betterment and the betterment of our fellow human beings all around us.

And nevertheless the story does have some shock value and it has some pretty graphic spots in it as well, as you noticed. A rich man then of some standing in the community, which is shown by his purple and his linen clothes, is like Ebenezer Scrooge, going along in life not particularly aware of the plight of the less fortunate in his life and of his callous attitude of his neighbors all around him. Now contrast that with the tiny Tim character in the story. Poor Lazarus who is ill, destitute who is begging at the city gate, and so pathetic that he is fed with the scraps of the dogs and the dogs do what? They lick the very sores on his body, oozing sores as we are told.

And suddenly both men die, the rich man finds himself tormented in Hell, and the poor man carried by angels into Heaven, and then enter Father Abraham, that spook that we spoke of before. Really a lot like Jacob Marley in Dickens' story, seeing and knowing everything that is going to happen and trying diligently to get the rich man to understand the point of what is happening. Add likewise to us his audience where we are to think of our own reclamation in this story as well.

Abraham points out in the next life, the tables are going to be turned, first will be last, the last will be first, the poor rich, the rich poor. Ironically the rich man even begs Lazarus to pity him enough to put cold water on his burning tongue, but Father Abraham points out that it is impossible because the gap between the two is far too wide and far too deep for anyone to pass. And so in a final gesture then the rich man asks the favor that if he can't cross the chasm could Lazarus at least warn his family before it is too late to change their way of living.

And Abraham makes an interesting observation when he says these words, listen to Moses and the prophets that is the teachings of the scriptures of this day, there is there all the rich man's family needs to know as how to live and love for God and for neighbor, there are no tricks, there are no secrets to living this way of life, and if that doesn't convince them even someone who rises from the dead won't influence their thinking in the process.

Now of course the last statement reminds us that the scribes and Pharisees, the religious leaders of Jesus day, were Jesus' true audience in this parable and it was unlikely that in their spiritual blindness that they would even understand what Jesus was even talking about. But isn't the same true of us, as Jesus modern audience? I repeat that I don't think the point of the story is to teach us any kind of doctrine of heaven of hell, or even to frighten us into changing the way that we live. But I do believe that Jesus meant to present his listeners with a grand opportunity, a second chance, not just to hedge our bets with what I call fire insurance that is going through just the motions of loving God and neighbor in this life.

Rather Jesus meant to give us a chance, a chance to examine the Christian walk, a chance to see where we may have lost sight of the goal, and make what I would call a mid-course correction in our lives. Days like this when we gather together for worship and fellowship, provide us the opportunity to do just that kind of thinking. Even though I still know folks that unfortunately like that rich man to pass those in need daily, and turn a blind eye, and offer a hard heart to the need of God to help those all around us in dire straits. But the best, the best part is this, it's not too late, it's not too late to move from religion from fire insurance to faith. Faith that feels compelled to help, faith that feels compelled to love, faith that feels compelled to share hope with the world. And so it is not too late that is the story of this parable, it's not too late, it's not too late.

Together we say, Amen.