

SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Jeremiah 9:23-24; Luke 16:19-31

Who do you know?

Something about human nature makes us love to name-drop. I think the logic goes: I'm somebody because I know somebody. And knowing someone does have its perks. People who know a police officer may get out of a ticket. People who know an athlete may get a ticket. People who know a salesman may get a break on a deal. People who know a doctor may get a deal on a break. As the saying goes, *"It's not what you know; it's who you know."*

The LORD says through Jeremiah: *"Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight."*

Do you know Him? Jesus warns, *"Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'"* (Matthew 7:22,23).

The rich man thought he knew the LORD. He'd been a rich man. God must have been on his side. And isn't that how we often think? Treasures in heaven are great and all, but "a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush." The promise of "a chicken in every pot and a car in every garage" got Herbert Hoover elected. We wouldn't mind the same promise from God, with an iPod thrown in for good measure. But you know what happened after Hoover was elected, don't you? And there's an even greater depression awaiting those who confuse riches with righteousness.

"There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores." Think of the contrast. The rich man, surrounded by luxury, wears fine linen and purple, the most expensive color. Lydia, you might remember, converted by Paul, made her fortune selling purple cloth. The rich man is the picture of happiness. And then there's Lazarus, covered with sores and starving, longing for the rich man's scraps, no balm for his sores, but only the merciful tongues of mangy, mongrel dogs, despised and unclean animals in ancient times, with whom he shares fleas and whatever other disease is on special that week. Lazarus knew no one. He had no name to drop. Even his own name seemed like a bad joke from above. Lazarus means *"God helps."* Some help! Life doesn't get worse than this. Or does it?

And let's stop here, and let's be honest. Who do you want to be at this point? How many are lining up behind Lazarus? I am guessing slightly less than lined up for Game 7 of the Pistons-Cavaliers series. All of us see value in the rich man. Few of us see value in Lazarus. How many would even notice him, let alone envy his position? He's the one you cross the street to avoid, the one you don't give money, assuming he'll just use it for booze. No one wants to be Lazarus. Lazarus is our worst nightmare. Lazarus is what keeps kids in school. If this is how God helps, we'd rather be left alone. The rich man thought he knew God because he seemed the one whom God blessed, but then again didn't Barabbas seem to be the same on Good Friday? Sometimes those whom God loves most are the hardest to look at.

"The time came when the beggar died." Luther's last words come to mind again: *"We are beggars all, that is true."* *"The time came when the beggar died."* Glory to God in the highest and so long to crumbs and dogs! Death changes everything, as well it should. It would hardly be death if it

didn't. And when death came, finally, for once in his life, Lazarus had a chance to name-drop. He knew somebody. He, who had spent his life in the back of every possible line, now got to move to the front of the only line that eternally matters. He, who lived on hard floors, soaking in the puss of his weeping sores, now left all weeping behind and got to stand by father Abraham's side.

Which line are you in? How many lines are you in? What are you in line to get? All that stuff may seem as pretty as purple right now, but it won't set you at father Abraham's side in the heavenly Jerusalem. *"Better a little with the fear of the LORD than great wealth with turmoil,"* the proverb says (Proverbs 15:16). And to quote Abe Lincoln, *"You can see what God thinks of money, when you see the people He gives it to."*

I have a fondness in my heart for a third century saint named Lawrence. St. Lorenz in Frankenmuth is named after him. He was a martyr. He was roasted to death on a gridiron. Legend says that at one point he joked with his persecutors, saying, *"Turn me over, I'm done on this side."* Thus, in the Roman Catholic Church, he is the patron saint of cooks. But how Lawrence died isn't as important as why. He was a deacon in the church of Rome. Ambrose tells us that Lawrence was commanded by the authorities to turn over the treasures of the church. He immediately went and gave away all the church had to the sick and poor, gathered them up, and brought them to the authorities, saying, *"Here are the treasures of the Church."*

And the Church is rich. The Church is far richer than all the wealthy of all the world, because the Church boasts countless beggars who know the King, who have a place at father Abraham's side, who have a room in the Father's house, who have the ear of the Prince of Peace, who have God's help, even when it seems they bear His curse instead. Remember what the writer to the Hebrews says: *"The Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.' Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons."*

"In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.' But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.'"

There was no more bossing Lazarus for the rich man. Their places were flip-flopped and fixed, not for a brief time on earth, but for an eternity in the afterlife. How sweet heaven tasted to Lazarus after the bitterness of this life! How bitter hell tasted to the rich man after the sweetness of this life! What wonderful and eternal comfort Lazarus received after fleeting years of suffering! What horrible and eternal suffering the rich man received after fleeting years of comfort! And this is all because Lazarus in his misery held on to one of the rich man's scraps, tossed carelessly away in the false confidence luxury affords: *"Moses and the Prophets."* How merciful our God is when He takes away all that would distract us so that what we cherish what we too often take for granted: *"Moses and the Prophets."* May we get to know them now if we plan to spend eternity in their neighborhood!

Jesus turns everything on its head today, but what's new. With Jesus it always seems the blind are seeing and the seeing blind, the first last and the last first, the poor rich and the rich poor, the sad happy and the happy sad. Why? They know the right person. They drop the right name. And that name is Jesus, for, as St. Peter reminds us, *"Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved"* (Acts 4:12).

What do you have? You *"have Moses and the Prophets."* Whom do you know? You know *"the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth."* What name can you drop? You

can drop the name of Jesus, in which *“you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified”* (1 Corinthians 6:11). What are you in line for? You are in line for a spot at father Abraham’s side. And what are all the riches in the world compared to that? They ought to be nothing. Amen.