

Dearly beloved: Christ is in our midst!

What does the word love mean? We use it very frequently. Someone says they love pizza. Another person loves football. And yet another loves autumn. And we say to a loved one, "I love you." There are obviously many different nuances about what love is. But what does love look like in action? Today's gospel shows us the consequences of a lack of love.

Jesus tells us the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. It is a story that shows what a failure to love means. It is a story of reversal of fortunes. It is a story about what happens to persons who selfishly enjoy blessings in this life. And it is a story about good persons who live with tribulations in this life.

The rich man lived it up with his money. He enjoyed the finest clothing and food every day. Lazarus patiently bore his sufferings. In the end, when both died, it was Lazarus who found favor with God, not the rich man. It was not because of his riches that the man found himself in torments after death. It was not his material wealth that condemned him but rather it was his spiritual poverty. Though rich in the things of this world, he was poor in regards to love of God and neighbor.

The rich man feasted and partied to his heart's content but never showed love for Lazarus. He never even took notice of him at his gate. He gave him no clothing, no food. Nothing. And though the rich man possessed all things material, yet not having love, the rich man was nothing. He lived in his own world where pleasure and gratification were the highest good. He lived wrapped up in himself so that others revolved around him. He lived caught up in soul-destroying selfishness. The rich man only had room in his heart for himself. He had no room to love Lazarus, he had no time for Lazarus. And because the rich man cut himself off from loving others in this life, he found himself in the next life cut off from the joys of heaven. His pride, his selfishness, went before his fall.

God fashioned each of us in His image in order that we would enter into a relationship with Him and with one another. He made us to love Him, to be His friends, to be His children by grace. Being in relationship involves going beyond ourselves to reach out to God, to reach out to others. To reach out we must die to our selfishness and ways of thinking and acting that revolve only around "I, me and my." What delivers us from the fate of the rich man is self-sacrificing love. Crucifying the corruption of our fallenness and daring to love others as God loves us. Loving others involves a dying to ourselves. Loving others requires that we crucify our pride and put on loving humility. Loving others does not make us weak, it makes us strong in Christ. By loving others, that is by crucifying our own selfishness, we have Christ living within us. We have Him as our model of faith and love.

His life shows us what life-giving love is – love is long-suffering and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful. Love is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way. Love is not irritable or resentful. Love does not rejoice in sin but rejoices in what is right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. If we ever wonder whether what we say or is loving, we only need look at those words of Saint Paul.

Our salvation is found in love, in love for our neighbor and our enemy. "If we gain our brother, we have gained God." (Saint Anthony the Great). For "if we cannot see Christ in the beggar, we will not find Him in the chalice." (St. John Chrysostom) Our salvation will be worked out in our relationships with each other and with God. We become our truest selves, we become full persons, by loving one another. Loving only ourselves, as the rich man learned, only brings death.

It would seem that Charles Dickens had this parable of Jesus in mind when he wrote A Christmas Carol. The ghost of Jacob Marley tells Ebenezer Scrooge that "It is required of every man that the spirit within him should walk abroad among his fellow-men, and travel far and wide;...in life my spirit never roved beyond the narrow limits of our money-changing hole...Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were, all, my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!" Ebenezer Scrooge, likewise, did not look to those in need, his own employee, Bob Cratchit and his family. But, unlike the rich man in the gospel, Scrooge changed his ways in life and gave to those in need, was charitable, merciful, forbearing, and benevolent. He turned his worldview from himself to others and showing them love.

Our victory in this life is found by being rich in love towards God and neighbor. This is the contest of living in the world – to live and to love in imitation of Christ. Keeping the faith in love will lead us from glory to glory, from this earthly life to the fullness of life with Christ in His kingdom. To Him be all honor and worship with the Father and the Spirit. Amen.