

19th Sunday after Pentecost - September 25th, 2016
Sermon preached by Darren Steadman, VTS Seminarian
Readings: Amos 6:1a,4-7, Psalm 146, 1 Timothy 6:6-19, Luke 16:19-31

Wasn't Jesus a great storyteller! Poor Lazarus is laying by the Rich Man's gate, starving, begging to gather crumbs from the Rich Man's table, covered in sores, even dogs licking his wounds, how pitiful! And the Rich Man - dressed in "purple and fine linen, feasting sumptuously every day." Poor Lazarus is the one who goes to heaven, and the Rich Man? Straight to Hell! Shocking, and kinda funny right? Abraham told the Rich Man: "You HAD your good things already - Gotcha!"

Jesus hung out with poor folks, and probably told this to a group of poor folks, so this story sounded really good to them. But how about to us? Today, we might not think it's so funny. Here we are in Loudon County, VA, the richest county in America. Sounds like maybe I am the "Rich Man"!! And I don't think that's good news for me. Can I be rich ... and go to heaven too? I wear fine linen. I have been known to feast, pretty sumptuously ... what does that mean for me? Would Jesus hang out with me if he were here today? What would Jesus think of me? What does Jesus think of me? And when I die, what will be my reward?

Let's change the subject ...

To know me is to know about my favorite job I've ever had - working at summer camps of our very own Diocese's retreat center called: Shrine Mont. I've worked there in many different ways for 13 of the past 17 summers. I directed a camp called Explorers' Camp, and we used to take the campers out to the Shenandoah River and set off in canoes for 3 days and 2 nights. The kids were not canoeing experts, so they had to learn how to steer through the rapids, and therefore how to paddle the canoe, and hold the paddle ...

But before ANY of that happened, there was one extremely important ritual that I **always** did first. Before even getting the canoes into the water, I would take everyone down into the river, wading in the water up to our shorts. And I told the kids and counselors this: "This river has the power to either keep us afloat, or turn every one of

our canoes upside down. We must now sacrifice ourselves to the power of the river, right now, or it's going to take us under later. And don't cheat this ritual, we have to go completely under, or else the river will take you down later."

So, us 15 counselors and campers would stand in a circle, hold hands, count to three, and fall completely down into the water. And every time, when everyone came back up, the same thing happened: complete joy and laughter. And Courage. And Humility. In my eyes, it was the most important thing that we did the whole trip. Our fear and ego was gone, and we were united. Only then, were we ready to go on our journey together.

Our Assistant Bishop of VA, Ted Gulick comes to summer camp during staff training week to inspire our work, and give us his blessing. Once he told all of us counselors that "Baptism is no less than: a death, and a resurrection." That ritual of honoring the power of the river was our baptism. Our fear and our ego died right there in the water. Our selfishness was replaced with teamwork. The sins of our self-serving ideas were washed away when we came back up out of the water. And our Christian ritual of Baptism is exactly the same.

Today, Anne and Ethan will be baptized. They will be washed of their previous lives, and resurrected into a new community of love and support. I know this because we are all about to join together to support them in their new life, it's in the bulletin! They will never be the same again, because God is about to claim them as God's own beloved children, forever. Their baptism is the death of their individual status here, and the resurrection into this community of St. Gabriel's, of Christians everywhere, and with God.

Our baptism, whether it happened long ago, or has not yet happened, is the same. All of us can join Anne and Ethan in this new holy unity. Some of us can re-commit to the baptism that once happened to us, and some can pray for that moment yet to come. Each time we do that, the kingdom of God's children grows and grows. Today is a big day for the kingdom, God bless you Anne and Ethan!

Now, remember that Rich Man who died and went to Hell? Is it okay to be rich? What kind of Rich do I want to be? Well, in today's letter to Timothy, we hear: "There is great gain in godliness combined with contentment ... if we have food and clothing, we will be content." And don't we also say: "Give us Lord, our DAILY bread"? "Give me, Lord, my food only for today, not a sumptuous feast every day, because there are poor people laying at my gate, begging for what I have to share." It's okay to be rich in spirit. And today, we are commanded to be rich in good works, and rich in our generosity, always ready to share.

I learned something about true riches this summer. I worked as a chaplain in an assisted-living home in Richmond. I sat with many elderly people every day, and listened to their life story. They didn't care to tell me about making money or the stuff that they bought. They didn't wear fancy linens like the Rich Man, they wore their favorite comfortable clothes. Their treasures were the stories of their families. They treasured their health. They treasured the people who came to visit them. They treasured every day they have left. These are the riches that we will treasure at the end of this life. We will treasure every day. We will treasure the ways that we helped to nurture our loved ones, and build up the kingdom of God. What riches are we seeking, today? What kind of Rich do we want to be?

Well then, let our baptismal covenant wash away our **selfish** desires for riches! Let our desires for more and more stuff - **die** today in the water and words of baptism. And let us be resurrected pursuing the riches of good works! Let our pursuit of treasure be for the foundation for building up God's kingdom. If our riches can create bigger and bigger family gatherings, then Amen! If our riches give us a happy, healthy retirement to help raise our grandchildren, then Amen! If our riches let us donate more and more money to the mission of the church each year, Amen! Like the words of today's scripture command us, let us unite in the baptism of Ethan and Anne, to take hold of the LIFE that is REALLY LIFE.