

## Trinity 1a

The coming of the Trinity season means that we shall be dealing with quite a few of Jesus' parables in the Sunday Gospels. However, we won't be dealing with as many as last year. A parable is a story Jesus tells and then uses it for at least two purposes.

When the parables first appear, Jesus tells his disciples – and us – that their main purpose is to separate those who understand them from those who do not – those who “get” it from those who don't “get it.”

If you don't “get it,” you aren't supposed to be satisfied with that, nor are you supposed to throw your hands up in despair. If you don't understand the parables, you are supposed to look for help – either from someone who does understand them or from a book written by someone who understands.

What seems to be a more obvious reason for the parables – that Jesus tells these stories to make a point about God that we can remember easily – is there too, of course, but it is secondary.

Today's parable is a sort of first-century version of a “St. Peter- at-the-pearly-gates” joke – that is to say, it is not to be taken mainly as teaching about what things are like in the afterlife. The story is making a much more important point. You've got to trust me that I do get it; I have read the books by those who do understand.

A pathetic beggar named Lazarus lies starving at the gate of a rich man's house. The rich man refuses to give him any food. In the next world the beggar is in the good place – called Abraham's bosom – and the rich man is in the bad place – called hell. It's hot in hell, so the rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus over with some water to cool him off.

Abraham replies, “The tables are turned now. Now, what he has is good and what you have is bad. And there is too big a gap between where you are and where we are for anyone to get across it any way.” Lazarus says, “If he can't help me, then please send him back to earth to my father's house so he can tell my five brothers how to escape my fate.”

Abraham responds, “They can learn the same message from the Bible.” Lazarus says, “They are too busy for Bible study, but if someone came back from the dead to talk with them they would get the message.” Abraham gets the last word and says, “If they won't pay attention to the scriptures, they aren't going to pay attention if someone comes back from the dead, either.”

One of the things that help us to “get” parables is to look at the context in which they come up. It is often the case that a parable's message is clearer when we see what is happening and what Jesus is saying just before it and just after it.

In the case of the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus just finished telling a rather difficult parable about a man who is about to be fired from his job. Before he is actually fired, he goes to his boss's customers and reduces the amount of money they owe. The boss actually compliments him on his shrewdness – probably because the amount by which the bills are reduced is the amount he would have taken for himself.

Jesus' point in that parable is that God gives us money on earth as a test – to find out whether we will use it wisely or not. True riches come from heaven. If we can not handle the lesser riches of earth properly, how can we expect God to entrust us with heavenly riches?

When we apply that insight to the rich man, Jesus' point becomes obvious. Part of using ones' riches in a wise and godly way is to give some of the riches away. If the rich man's brothers had read the Hebrew Bible they would have known of the obligation to tithe – to give ten percent of ones' money away to support religion and to feed the poor.

The standard of tithing persists in the New Testament as well. A person who does not at least tithe is not using his money wisely according to God's standards. But you see, tithing is not merely giving money; giving of ones' time and using ones' God given ability also counts. And when we come to the next world, God's standard are the only ones that matter.

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus also underscores the point St. John makes in today's epistle. He is talking about love. He says that the love God showed us by sending Jesus into the world to die to forgive our sins obliges us to love one another. Love in the New Testament sense is acting for another person's good without calculating what we are going to get out of it for ourselves.

Nobody told the rich man to make Lazarus his social friend. Loving Lazarus meant feeding him. The rich man just would not do it, and the consequences were grave.

There is also a Christian twist to this very Jewish story, when Abraham says, "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead." In the immediate context, he is talking about the silliness of sending Lazarus to the rich man's brothers, but, more broadly, he is judging Israel.

The fact that they did not accept Jesus as the Messiah even after he came back from the grave shows that they had not really understood their own scriptures. **They just didn't "get it."**

I'm going to refer you to a scripture reading to conclude. The Epistle to the Galatians tells us, "While we have time, let us do good unto all men; and especially unto them that are of the household of faith." **While we have the time.**