

## Luke 16:19-32

### “What Does It Take to Believe?” – 9/30/07

There is an old story about a notorious and mean bandit in the Far East who had been badly injured. He was taken to a Christian mission hospital. After weeks of excellent care, the bandit recovered from his injuries. He was so grateful for his treatment at the mission hospital that he promised he would never again rob a Christian.

Well, the word got around, and everyone he tried to rob would immediately say, “I’m a Christian.” And so the bandit was faced with a problem: *How can you tell whether a person who claims to be a Christian really is a Christian?*

So the bandit returned to the hospital and asked the missionaries, who explained: “Well, every Christian should know the Lord’s Prayer and the Ten Commandments.”

From that time on, the robber would ask potential victims to recite the Lord’s Prayer and the Ten Commandments. If they couldn’t do it, he would rob them.

If this bandit were doing business today, how many Christians could recite these two touchstone texts? And if they could not, what might be other marks of Christian faith? Does reciting anything, even holy writ, define us as Christian? Does going to church define us as Christian? Does the water of baptism, or the giving of our money to God’s work, or the coming to the Lord’s table secure us in God’s eternity? (L. Sweet, *Out of the Questions, Into the Mystery*, p. 30)

Some of the meanest people I know can quote astounding amounts of Scripture. Some of the kindest and most generous people would not be able to recall the Ten Commandments. Lots of people can recite rules and laws and possible facts about faith; but lots of those people do not seemingly live in God’s good love and light.

What is the true test of faith? Is it knowledge gained and measured? Is it the articulation of some doctrines? Is it some level of trust in God’s promises? Is it some deep level of relationship with God and others? Is it a manner of living? What does God want from you and from me? Does God want us to think the right thoughts or do the right things?

Henri Nouwen says Christian faith is about moving from the moral to the mystical. That makes good sense to me in these days. How can we increasingly encounter God’s mystical presence in our daily living and move from the moral to the mystical?

Leo Tolstoy once suggested that certain questions are put to humanity not so much that we should answer them but that we should spend a lifetime wrestling with them. I like that too. Maybe Christian faith is somewhere in those thoughts, in struggling to discover God in our midst, and in struggling to discover what deep and abiding faith really looks like.

If you have been around this church across the recent weeks, we have been mostly moving through the chapters of Luke’s gospel. For many Sundays since the middle of the summer, we have been listening to Jesus tell stories, offer teachings, and share his wisdom. Back in July, we heard the story of the man who asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan which ends in these words: “go and do likewise.” We heard Jesus tell the story of Mary and Martha, two

faithful women doing different things in Jesus' presence, and Jesus makes us wonder which one chose the better portion. Then there was the story of Jesus' teaching his disciples to pray. And there were stories of Jesus encouraging his disciples in living in this world and the next. Last week, we had the story of the dishonest manager where Jesus is urging us to be shrewd, wise, creative, not simply predictable and complacent, in our service of God.

Then today, for the second time in this very chapter, 16, Jesus begins the story by saying "there was a rich man...." Jesus offers another story in a long line of teaching and parables. Jesus' goal is that people will live well, faithfully. Jesus' goal is that those who hear will have lives transformed. Jesus is hoping to enlighten, to inspire, to encourage his hearers in their journey, in what direction they should go.

I have entitled this sermon "What does it take to believe?" I use the word "believe" with a great deal of caution. I am afraid that our modern use of the word connects that which we "believe" too often with a certain set of "beliefs." Christian faith and believing are perhaps too often associated with a possible list of statements that we are expected to say are true – whether they are biblical teachings, or doctrines, or dogma. To be a Christian, "to believe," means to accept certain things a certain way. So to ask, "what does it take to believe?" you may think that I am asking basically what does it take to move you from this point – where you do not accept something as true – to another point – where you would accept it as true.

I want to be very clear this is not the best way for me, or most of us, to think about believing. I do not think that the best way to know if you are Christian is your mental assent, or verbal affirmation, of certain things. This is more of a recent phenomenon where faith and belief are associated with doctrines, or data, or biblical rules.

The word *BELIEVE* is an ancient compounding of the verb, *to be*, and the noun, *life*. To "believe" is to "be live"- that is, to live your being, to trust your being to "life." And the root meaning of "believe" is really not about giving mental assent; it means "giving you heart to" or "to hold dear" or "to love" toward LIFE. (Sweet, ..Into the Mystery, p. 27)

Actually, in all those passages through the middle of Luke's gospel, which we have been reading, Jesus never really teaches about assenting to anything. His teachings have to do with relationships, with actions, with re-ordering our lives, hoping that we will give our heart to God and others. All of his stories are about neighbors, and praying, and money, and faithfulness – not about reciting things a certain way, or assenting to certain ideas. And all of these stories and teachings are trying to shape us a certain way as hearers, to form us as a people. Again, Jesus' goal is that people will live well, faithfully, loving God and others. Jesus is hoping to enlighten, to inspire, to encourage us all in the journey toward life with God and life with others. Jesus keeps urging us to think about our lives, and nurture a vision, a heart, a life that leads to life with God and improved life for all God's people. It would be a life where love prevails, and hope emerges, and kindness is spread, and peace takes hold. And he keeps telling these stories and offering his wisdom and engaging us so that indeed we will experience a glimpse of God's intended purposes and coming reign.

In all these stories, Jesus might be asking himself, "What does it take for these people to believe?" When will they see and live differently? When will they get it – it is

not about loving self, but loving God and other. It is not about tending to your own needs, but the needs of others. It is not about racing and going full tilt doing this and that, it is about recognizing God in your midst. Verse after verse, story after story, this is what Jesus is hoping, urging, attempting – that his hearers will hear and have lives that are changed – that they will believe – which really means “give their hearts to” to loving God and loving others such that God’s reign comes near. He is teaching and sharing so that we will be about loving and doing, caring and going in a way that spreads God’s light and peace.

So in today’s passage, Jesus begins again by saying “there was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay and poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores.”

This is a story where Jesus is using graphic images and gripping detail to make his point about faith and money, about riches and blessings. In other places in the gospel story, Jesus stresses “blessed are the poor, for they shall be comforted; they shall inherit the kingdom.” In other places in the gospel story, Jesus has also said “woe to you” who are rich, who wear fine clothes – discipleship and eternal life can be elusive for the wealthy.

This story evolves pretty quickly with both the rich man and Lazarus dying. Lazarus finds himself taken up by angels to the lap of Abraham. The rich man find himself in Hades, crying out to Abraham. There is a huge chasm set between them. This is the way Jesus depicts it to make a point – the rich have blessings on earth, the poor have blessings in heaven.

Then the rich man pleads with Abraham. “If that is the case, then let Lazarus go the rich man’s house, where he has 5 brothers, so Lazarus can tell his rich family the score, and warn them, so that they will not end up in torment.”

Abraham responds: “They have Moses and the prophets to tell them the score. Let them listen to them. If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, then neither will they listen to Lazarus, even if he is raised from the dead.”

See, Jesus keeps telling stories, and sharing wisdom, and making them as graphic as he can in order to nurture faith, to help people hear, and see things differently. This story of the rich man and Lazarus, like all the others, is another attempt by Jesus to help us re-order life, and believe – which means give your heart to God in love and service, and find new and fresh ways to love and serve God in all things. He wants us to think about our lives and be motivated in new ways to love God, to be changed out of our complacency, and discover the greatness of giving life away, helping others, using money and wealth to make the world a better place.

What does it take that we might do that? The rich man says send Lazarus to his family, then they will know the score. They will see a dead man raised, then they will be moved to faith and life, discipleship and love, generosity and service.

What does it take that we might be motivated to live for God, to live selflessly, to really care and serve and promote the reign of Christ in our town, our community, our world? What will it take to have our hearts so captured by God that we live as God’s

people? What will it take to believe, whereby we sincerely give our lives away in God's service? This is what Jesus keeps urging, teaching, hoping, calling forth from us.

Hunter Farrell is the new Director of World Mission for the PCUSA. He wrote recently about going to a conference of the Presbyterian Global Fellowship – this is a group in our larger church seeking to renew the church's commitment to world missions. Before he went to this conference in Houston, he said he wondered if the conference would challenge the church with the radical claims of Jesus, or would the conference water down Jesus' message in order to make it more palatable to North American Presbyterians. And Farrell reminds us that we as Presbyterians are among the wealthiest religious communities in this the wealthiest nation. And what he continues to discover, to his joy and amazement, is how Presbyterians are more and more talking about engaging our consumeristic culture with Jesus' ongoing question – “if we truly follow Jesus, how do we live in relationship to our wealth and the poor around us?” That is one of those questions that Tolstoy says we are to struggle with always. Whatever “wing” of the church we are in, all of us are called to join the movement of God's Spirit – reforming the church around Jesus' sincere call to reach out in love and forgiveness, hope and generosity especially to the poor near and far.

This church, and the larger church, has a deep commitment to serve God in the world. And Jesus keeps calling each of us – to give our hearts and lives to loving and serving God. We are wealthy Christians and we are called, implored to tend to the least, the poor, the hungry. This is our calling, our responsibility!

What does it take to believe? It is less about holding to “right” beliefs; it is holding the “right” hands – which are the hands of the poor and suffering, the least among us. It is less about how rightly we think about certain issues. It is more about how well we are loving God and others. The test according to Jesus, is never what we know or say, but how well we love and care.

In his book Letters to a Young Doubter, Bill Coffin says over the years he is increasing convinced that the more important question is not who believes in God, but in whom does God believe? Our abiding task is to live into the answer of that question, knowing very well that God always believes in the poor and suffering, as we see in this story about the rich man and Lazarus. And God also believes in us, inviting us again and again to “follow” Jesus, to care for the weak and troubled, to give our lives away, to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God. God believes in us to become more and more God's loving, serving, peaceful, hopeful people who work with God to bring about the reign of Jesus Christ our Lord. May each of us, in God's strength and Spirit, keep seeking to know that God believes in us, and that God calls us to give our lives to God and one another in loving serving, feeding the hungry, helping the needy, serving the least of these, today and forever. May that be our way. Alleluia. Amen

**Prayer: Holy God, to turn from you is to fall; to turn to you is to rise; to stand with you, and to work and serve with you in loving serving, is to abide forever. We commit our lives to that WAY following Jesus. Amen**

**This sermon was preached as a part of regular morning worship at Blacksburg Presbyterian Church, Blacksburg, VA on Sunday, September 30, 2007 by Alex Evans, Pastor. This is a rough manuscript.**