

Trinity 1 Sermon by Bishop Michael Hawkins

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If God so loved us, we ought also to love one another.

What is life? Does it consist merely in all those things we have and enjoy: riches, clothing, and food? Jesus tries desperately to get us to see beyond these possessions. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? The rich man, and we rich men and women, are not as likely to consider whether this is all there is, happy to receive and enjoy our good things in our lifetime. But we are due for a rude awakening. And we shall wake up, knowing and feeling our own emptiness and alienation. Just pray that that awakening may be on this side of death and eternity. We read in Revelation 3.17 the words of warning to Laodicean Christians, which fit us so well: "For you

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say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked."

The poor and needy, the oppressed and neglected, the sick and suffering, Lazarus, they are more likely to hope for more.

If life does not consist in possessions, in material riches, then our readings today argue that our human life and our eternal life consists in love. What St. John sets before us, in glorious but dense theology of that Epistle, is the connection between knowledge, love, and life.

God is love, John tells us, and since we were created in the image and likeness of God, our life, our very being, is to be found in love. It is that likeness which was marred and muddied by sin, and which is being renewed in us by the gift and work of

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the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is re-making us in knowledge and love, after the likeness and glory of Jesus himself. By the Holy Spirit, we know and trust the Father and the Son, and we believe and receive the love that God has for us.

In Jesus Christ and by the Holy Spirit, we come to a new and complete knowledge and love of God. But as well, in Jesus Christ and by the same Holy Spirit, we come to a new and complete knowledge and love of our fellow human, our neighbour. This Christian knowledge and love of God is summarily, to know and love him as our Father. And this Christian knowledge and love of one another is to know and love as brothers and sisters. For if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another. If God loves us all as our Father, we ought to love one another as brothers and sisters. And our

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refusal or failure to so love one another, is a denial and rejection of God's love. So if our being and life consist in this love, the lack of it is our death. John's theology is clear and consistent, and he writes earlier in this Epistle, chapter 3 verse 14, "He who does not love abides in death."

This is the lesson of our Lord's parable. The rich man's death, torment and regret, have all to do with a failure to love. Wherever the rich man ends up, it seems an awful lot to be the hell of his own choosing and making. James warns us that judgment is without mercy, to one who has shown no mercy. The rich man, and others like him, who choose to live in a world without mercy, without forgiveness, without love, may regret to discover how much God will respect their decisions and choices. This parable would help us to see that hell, whatever or

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wherever it is described, is a state of definitive self-exclusion from God. Let me repeat that – hell is a state of definitive self-exclusion from God. We choose to be separated from God.

And besides all this, there is a great gulf fixed. Abraham tries to explain to the rich man about the separation of heaven and hell, what C.S. Lewis called the Great Divorce. The way to pass, is of course by the cross of Jesus Christ, but those who reject that way, will find no other, nothing but a great gulf fixed. Remember the quotation, that those who will not forgive others burn the very bridge over which they themselves need to pass, if they are to be saved. The only thing that can bridge the gulf is love and mercy and compassion, exactly what the rich man has rejected all his life.

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There is a great gulf fixed, but it was fixed first in the heart and mind of that rich man. And I must warn you not to let any such gulf be fixed in your mind and heart. For it shall kill you. Not to love one another is spiritual death. He who does not love abides in death.

But let's get honest and practical. It ain't easy! We grate on each other, offend and are offended, and often, despite all kinds of real effort, we can hardly bear one another, let alone love each other.

So what can we do? Learn the lesson again, that through the weakness of our own mortal nature, we can do no good thing without God and his grace. Secondly, we need to look to Jesus Christ and seek the power of the Holy Spirit. If God so loved us, we ought also to love one another. Quite often, we cannot

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love one another, because we have not yet known and believed the love that God has for us. God's love is free and unmerited. God's love takes the initiative. It forgives all at its own expense. If we don't love one another, perhaps we don't know that we ourselves are sinners, that Jesus is the Son of God and Saviour of the world, and that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. For it is only in that love, in knowing and believing that love and receiving the power of that love, that we shall ever be able to love one another.

Whose heart is so hard that it is not convicted by the word of Jesus in that parable? What shall we do? Well, we must first confess our faults, and then seek to be renewed in the saving love of God. It's simple but not easy. If God so loved us, we

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ought also to love one another. And this commandment we have from him, that he who loveth God love his brother also.