

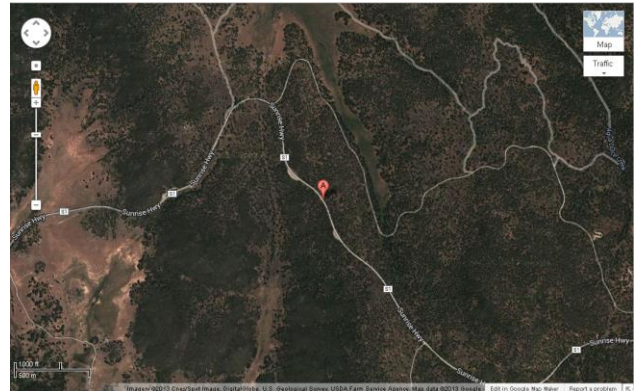
The Big Picture

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost; Series C
Luke 16:19-31

Technology is fascinating, isn't it? In the application, Google Maps, for instance, a person can type in an address to a particular place and view that place from different perspectives. Google calls a "close up" perspective its "street view." And so a person can drag an image shaped like a person onto the map itself and can travel around from the perspective of one driving on a given road. It gives a whole new meaning to the phrase, "road trip." A person can view homes, businesses, and the landscape, all from this perspective. It is quite a fascinating application as many of you, I am sure, already know. From this "street view" perspective, one can learn a great deal about a place before even personally visiting it. Moreover, a person learns different kinds of information than one would have if they just read a book about the place or heard someone talk about it. But if the "street view" was all you had, it would be difficult to navigate, would it not? You would be left searching for points of reference in order to make sense of the "street view" perspective and understand your location in terms of the broader landscape. It would almost be too close. It would be a little more difficult to know fully where you are headed from this perspective alone.



Google Maps also has a perspective it calls the "satellite view". A person can zoom out to get a broader perspective and more general reference points like nearby cities and other landmarks. From this perspective a person can better understand her location and where she is headed in relation to other places. For the ease of navigation both views are important. A heavy reliance on any one perspective can result in the proverbial "losing the forest for the trees" or "losing the trees for the forest."



I bring this all up because these two Google Map views helps us better understand the general question Jesus is leading us to consider through the parable or story of the Rich Man and Lazarus in our Gospel reading. I suggest that this fairly well known story of Jesus often gets misunderstood. This misunderstanding perhaps begins when it is interpreted as fact or as a true story rather than as a fictional illustration used by Jesus to make a true and factual point about the Kingdom of God and God's reign in this world. Two general false interpretations are made.

One false interpretation asserts that we see in this parable an imperative and requirement to help the Lazarus's of the world; a mandate to care for the poor. Certainly helping those who have legitimate physical needs is important. The Bible speaks of that very clearly in many places. Loving our neighbor as ourselves is how Jesus himself sums up commandments 4-10 of the Ten Commandments. Love and compassion for the need of others should be done freely,

though, not out of coercion or an expectation to get something for it in return. If we are interpreting this parable as a mandate to help out those in physical need then we are missing the greater point of the parable.

A second false interpretation asserts that we can learn a great deal in this parable about what happens when we die. Certainly, the Bible does give us some information about that in-between time between a person's death and the return of our Lord, but this is not the most appropriate place to find that information. We can know and rest assured from other passages of Scripture in at least three truths about those who die in the Lord and are trusting firmly in Christ: 1. That the person is at peace 2. That the person is resting from his or her labors 3. That the person is waiting for Christ's return. To make this parable primarily about the afterlife is to, again, miss Jesus' greater purpose for telling it. To refer to our beginning illustration, both of these previous interpretations seem to operate solely in "street view" and they run the risk of "losing the forest for the trees."

It appears that when we understand this parable as a story or illustration within its context in the Gospel of St. Luke, we can begin to realize that Jesus is getting after a bigger, broader, more general question. It seems that he is driving his readers to consider the "forest for the trees" and not lose sight of the "satellite view." That is to say, Jesus is calling his readers to consider the question: "What is the purpose for my life" (See Dr. Jeffrey Gibbs, "Lectionary at Lunch—Luke 16:19-31," Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, MO)?

In order to get at this question, Jesus introduces us to a character he calls "the rich man." In the previous few chapters of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus had been warning of the danger of serving two gods, two masters. Primarily, Jesus was speaking about the tendency that still exists among us today to make money and possessions into a god or a master. To make the pursuit of material wealth and possessions what occupies our time and talents. He warns against the tendency that exists among us today to interpret the pursuit of happiness and the American dream as the pursuit of wealth and possessions and a certain expected lifestyle. He warns against letting material wealth so consume us that we find ourselves gloating when we got it and griping when we don't. It is in this context of Jesus' caution against the desire and love of material wealth and goods that we can best understand this parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus and be able to consider that question, "What is the purpose for my life?" In short, the character of "the rich man" reminds us that the purpose of our lives extends far beyond the accumulation of assets, the gratification of our desires, and the pursuit of our pleasures.

Through the telling of the parable Jesus takes us from "street view" to "satellite view." He calls us to consider a greater purpose to your life and mine. I would like to suggest that the greater purpose is this—"to love the Lord your God first and foremost and to love others as yourself." This is your Heavenly Father's Will for your life, summed up in the Ten Commandments. The fault of the rich man in the story was that he had given into that temptation to make his life solely about the pursuit of his desires. He was concerned primarily about what he was going to eat, drink, and wear. He perhaps had that other proverb as his motto, "Eat, drink, and be merry." It was as if he was on cruise control in "street view."

As Jesus moves us to "satellite view" in the parable he points us to a reference and landmark. He directs our attention to the Holy Scriptures, to Moses and the Prophets. After his death this rich man is now concerned about others. Particularly, he is concerned about his five brothers. He is concerned about those five that are also perhaps living in

“street view” with little concern for the bigger picture. Perhaps we have some “five brothers” in our lives for whom we are concerned. Those that do not know nor have given thought to the greater purpose of their lives. And he points them to God’s holy, true, and inspired Word that reveals the bigger picture. Specifically, the Holy Scriptures reveal the one who makes it possible for us to live out God’s greater purpose for our lives.

At the very end of our parable we have these words, “If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead” (Lk 16:31). God has revealed himself and the greater purpose of his plan of salvation and redemption for this world not only through the Holy Scriptures, Moses and the Prophets, but first and foremost through his Son. Christ is the one who has broken into this world to fulfill the Law and the Prophets, to live the obedient life of the perfect man to love God and love others. Through his sacrifice and resurrection he redeems your life for his purposes. God unites his greater purposes with your life so that your daily life may reflect his greater purposes. He brings his forgiveness to you in his Word and Holy Sacraments. Our Post-Communion prayer sums it up well. Right after we receive the very body and blood of the one who has broken the heavens to come down to our streets and dwell among us, we pray this prayer: “We give thanks to you, almighty God, that you have refreshed us through this salutary gift, and we implore you that of your mercy you would strengthen us through the same in faith toward you and in fervent love toward one another; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever” (*LSB* 212). In faith toward you and in fervent love toward one another—this is God’s greater purpose for each day of our lives. God enable us through his grace to boldly trust him and to carry his “satellite perspective” into our streets. Amen.