

SERMON

Pastor Cris Frigm

I will confess to you that I have very little interest in what happens to me after I die. It's not that I don't believe in what God has promised, but, in truth, I really. Don't. care.

Now before you start sharpening pitchforks, or googling the Bishop's number, I should emphasize that I'm fully on board with what the scriptures tell us about eternal life...as much as I've been able to understand. I'm not in any way questioning the truth of the gospel that we belong to God in this life and after death.

But I also firmly hold onto the idea that we really – **really** – don't have any real understanding of just what happens after we die. Because there is no clear, uniform picture in the bible of what it might look like. There are no final answers to explain it. And that's precisely where I stop caring.

I don't think we can understand what that promise means on this side of the grave and so I'm not going to spend much energy trying to figure it out. Yes, I believe in the promise of baptism that becomes fully realized for us after we've drawn our last breath, but I don't worry about it from one day to the next. Maybe as I get a bit older, and it feels a bit more imminent, my feelings might change on the matter.

But I think I'm truly living a life worthy of the gospel when I trust that the grace of God has that part of eternal life figured out and I'm going to worry about something else...like maybe what I'm going to do tomorrow.

I don't think I'm revolutionary in my thinking on the subject, or that I'm alone in my position, but I do think it can be hard to push back against millennia of theological teaching on the virtues of the life that comes after we die. My cynicism kicks in full force when I think about the way foundational teachings of the church became entirely focused on the glory of the life that comes after we die.

Have you ever considered why the medieval church in Europe might want to teach about how little this life mattered, and how focused we should be on that mystical, never quite fully explained, vision of life in heaven? Have you ever wondered what the rich and powerful white men of feudal Europe would have to gain by telling generations of serfs and subjects, living in poverty and riddled with disease, that their suffering is only temporary...until they die...but just wait until what happens then!

Maybe they had a particular lens through which they were looking at God's "grace."

Or maybe we should consider carefully what the white, American, Christian church of the early to mid-1800s might have had in mind when it extolled the beauty of life after death to enslaved African workers who were treated like property?

Like I said, I may be a cynic, but I've long since stopped worrying about what might happen someday. I'm worried about today. I'm worried about tomorrow. I'm worried about

how my faith...how my trust in God's love might have an impact on the community *now*. I'm going to trust in the promises of God and find a way to act for the sake of the people, known and unknown, that are trying to find their way through the struggles of today.

The rich man in today's parable faces judgment when he ignores what's happening around him. He gets to that "eternal life" only to find it isn't at all what he expected.

Within his particular worldview he's so caught up in himself and *his* expectations that, even after he's dead, he acts like his experience is going to be the same as what he had in life. He's in Hades – however that's supposed to be understood – but acts like he can still boss around someone "without power," just like he did in life. The story offers no grace at all for this rich man – he doesn't even get a name. The fact that the rich man knows Lazarus' name in death suggests that he probably knew him in life, too. And never offered any relief to him when he had the chance.

The very structure of the story tells us that we're supposed to pay attention to this beggar covered with sores. He's the only person in all of Jesus' parables who gets a name. Lazarus is given a name – a name that means "God helps" because he is a person of value, no matter where he's ended up. Lazarus wasn't just lying at the gate as if he decided that was the place he wanted to live out his life's dreams.

I think often of the folks we see practically standing in traffic, on the medians of our intersections and how I used to judge them for choosing a dangerous place to try to guilt people into helping them. Or at least that's how I looked at it.

We who have privilege – and we have a lot – are quick to judge them for not meeting our standards, when it's very likely they were put in that position out of desperation. Lazarus wasn't "laying" at the gate. Lazarus was "e-bebleto-ed" at the gate. The Greek word translated as "lay" has a sense of being put down, cast out, thrown into that place.

Much like that person on the street corner, Lazarus is **stuck** in poverty, most likely through no fault of his own, and ignored by everyone but the mangy wild dogs whose saliva is not known for its therapeutic value.

I've been able to identify four different folks who stand at the intersection of Chestnut Hill Road and South Chapel St. I don't know their names. But someone is almost always there, trying to survive. Desperate.

My take on how we look at this life, the next life, and salvation, comes in large part by something I read in seminary, written by Jay McDaniel. He wrote, "If someone asks, 'Are you saved?' we should not say 'Yes' or 'No.' We should say, 'Sometimes, but you better ask my neighbors, too. If they are still suffering, I'm not saved either. We are in it together.'"

I work very hard to remember that saved by grace means that we don't worry about eternal life, we live for this life. We live for the sake of our neighbor and the world. We have

so many opportunities to care for the people we encounter in this world in turmoil, and yet far too many prove the axiom, “so heavenly minded that we’re no earthly good.”

Generations of focusing on the reward of heaven has helped us forget that God created **this** world and declared it good. God promised to save **this** world – the whole creation in the reality of eternal life. God promised grace and peace for each one of us – and the birds of the air, the beasts of the field, the fish in the sea. The air we breathe, the water we drink.

If none of that matters. If it’s all just about promised glory after we die, then aren’t we just a big fancy death cult? Maybe we haven’t evolved out of the Middle Ages as much as we think. Maybe we need to think more carefully about how our words and actions make this world a better place.

The rich man and his brothers could never conceive of the world that comes from the resurrection. He just kept trying to make the world in his own image. But we’ve heard the story of the one who rose from the dead. We’ve been told the truth about a world that is loved by God unconditionally. We are made in **God’s** image. Are we going to trust it enough to find those cast down to the gates? Are they saved too? Have we asked them? Not for some promised life after this difficult life is over, but here today. Right now. If we can’t say they are, then we have work to do. Amen.