

The Rev. Billy Cervený:

Awesome, pray with me.

Father, thank you for the gift of your word. Thank you that by your word and by the death and resurrection of your son,

we are called children of God. Thank you, Lord. Open the eyes of our heart that we may know who you are and know what it means to walk in you. In your name, Jesus, amen.

Y'all have a seat. Good morning, everybody.

How we doing? (Congregation Laughing)

You know, one of the things I love in life are weddings. Growing up in the church, I'm sure if, like most of you, you probably went to a lot of weddings growing up. I loved them. I always wanted to be in one.

And it wasn't until I was 18 years old that I was asked to be in a wedding.

It was my friend, his name was Jim Weldon, and he was my young life leader. He was a lot older.

And he called me one day, I was a senior in high school, and he had been dating this girl for a long time, and he says, "Dude, I'm getting married. "Do you want to be in my wedding?" And I was so honored. I was like, "Yes, are you kidding? "I have to be in a wedding, "and I'm thinking I'm gonna be like the best man, "or I'm gonna give the bride away, or whatever it is." I said, "What do you want me to do?"

And he says, "Will you be a candle lighter?"

I was like, "A candle lighter?"

And just to be clear, I don't think it was like all the candles, I think it was a candle. I think I was lighting a candle. But you know what?

I was so honored.

And the reason I was so honored is that it was my story with this guy.

Because it was my ninth grade year in high school,

and it was a really hard place in my life. I was feeling really awkward. I didn't know who my people were. It was like this transition time, and just my sense of identity in where I fit in was kind of just, I was a little bit lost.

And I remember sitting there in the grass outside of a classroom at Episcopal, and I was watching some of these older, cooler guys that were soccer players juggling a soccer ball in a circle, and then all of a sudden, I see this guy walk across campus who was in his 20s, and it was Jim, he was, again, my young life later, and he was just kind of, you know, just this cool guy who walks up, says, "Hey, how you doing?" And everybody lit up, and they started playing with him, and I thought to myself, I remember sitting there thinking, "I wish he had walked up to me."

"I wish he had picked me. "I so want to be a part of that."

It was almost on cue that he turned around, and he lifted his eyes, and he passed that soccer ball right to my feet. He says, "What's your name?"

I told him my name.

And the next day, he showed up again, and he said, "Hey, how you doing? "You remember my name?" And the next day, he showed up again, and again, and again, and not only did we become friends, it was like he adopted me into this little community, his little, his tribe, and it changed my life. We began to we would go surfing together. We'd go to Young Life together. He would stay with us when our parents went out of town. It was, it's hard to articulate the difference that made in my life, being picked,

being chosen like that.

It gave me this profound sense of identity and this sense of belonging that impacted not just how I felt but the choices I made in my life.

So when Jim asked me to be a candlelighter,

I was like, "Yes!"

Because it was important to me, because I was important to him, and I mattered to him. You know, and I wish I could say, like that was just that identity stuff, and wanting to belong, that's what happens to us as little kids, but you know what? It's the same for us as adults.

I can sit here at age 56, and I can tell you, I am no different than I was then. I still wanna be chosen, I still wanna be picked.

Why is that?

Like, what is that mechanism in us? Is that just an ego thing?

Because it runs really, really deep.

It affects my sense of identity, and my sense of identity affects my understanding of where I fit in the rest of the world, where I fit in with the rest of the world, where I understand my role in the larger story, affects the way I act, it affects the way I live my life, and where I treat people, it affects the way I understand God and my purpose.

If I don't have a sense of identity, I feel lost. I gotta create one on my own.

It's this powerful thing, let me tell you what, it doesn't just, and it also doesn't matter to us, even as Christians.

This question of identity matters to us, especially as Christians.

It's this thing that you find in scripture that Jesus drills in all the time, the Apostle Paul drills in all the time, God in the Old Testament, you can't turn a page without finding him drilling into that question.

So we're doing this new series now called The Spirit-Filled Life,

and we are talking about what does it mean, what's the implication for us in our lives that we have the gift of the Holy Spirit? Like, how does that change us? And this week, we're talking about this idea of adoption,

adoption that we were once outside the family of God, and he pulls us in, and he makes us one of his own. And I wanna spend a little time, I wanna unpack that today. What is this adoption business about in scripture?

What is this adoption business about? How does it transform our identity, and why does that matter?

And we're looking at this passage today, we just read in Luke 16.

And Jesus is talking to the Pharisees, and he begins to tell them this parable. And he starts to, (Static)

He's telling the story of this exorbitantly rich man.

He's sort of this first century Jeff Bezos type. We don't know a lot about him, but we know that he dresses in purple like Prince, you know, he dresses in purple, he's flaunting himself. He eats opulently, sumptuously, as it said today in our reading, and he has gates around his house, and that he walks in with great importance, and he walks past this beggar who lays on the ground at his gate. And this beggar's name is Lazarus.

And as rich as this, the rich man is Lazarus is that poor.

Says he lays by the gates, he's got sores all over his body like ew, and they say the dogs come and lick his sores.

And just to be clear, they're not talking about like golden retrievers coming up.

Back in those days, that meant like wild, dangerous, rabid, or you know, feral animals that would come and lick his wounds. So Lazarus is starving; he longs to eat the crumbs off the rich man's table, and the rich man passes him by. So one day Lazarus dies, and the scripture says that the angels carry him to Abraham's side.

And then the rich man dies and he finds himself in Hades, and he's tormented in flames, and he cries out, "Father Abraham, please help me.

"Send Lazarus.

"Just go get him to dip his finger in this water. "Get him to come to me and just drip it on my tongue. "That's all I'm asking, please. "Just give me a little relief."

And Abraham says, "No.

"You know, you've lived your life. "You devoted it to all these fleeting things, "and Lazarus suffered. "Now it's time for both of you to be where you belong."

So this is a really famous passage. You've probably heard this before. And it's also kind of a scary passage, isn't it? It's very intense.

And it reads like this big, you get what you deserve parable.

But when you get closer to it, it's about something deeper. There's a lot of layers to this.

It speaks about how what we belong to or what we give ourselves to it shapes our identity.

And what we understand, our identity defines everything about the way we live, right?

See, one thing you're gonna notice in this story was when you read it, the rich man in this story he doesn't have a name. He has no name.

The only way that he is identified, it says in the passage, is the rich man because he is defined by everything that he has given himself to.

His clothes, what he eats, the way he lives.

Those are the things that he consumes, his gluttony, all the fine things. When you build your identity around things like that, it's a really insecure place.

It's very fleeting.

So the implication is this rich man had to consume more and more money, more food.

You know, the interesting thing about this is is when he dies, even when he dies and he is stripped of all these things, and he's in despair, the rich man is totally blind to himself.

All those things that defined him are gone. And he clings to the only identity that he had.

In Hades, he's still acting like the rich man. He's barking orders to Abraham, telling him like, "Hey Abraham, would you please go get Lazarus and tell him to dip his finger in?" Like what?

He's still, he's blind to himself. He's blind to his condition, blind to his situation.

See, who you understand yourself to be determines everything.

It determines what you do. Your moral imperatives.

And we're so committed to these identities that we build that we don't even see them half the time.

And those are the most dangerous ones

because they drive us almost like the silent operating system. I remember in Nashville, there was this homeless guy that stood on the corner of this really busy intersection. And I don't know who he was. I don't know what his story was, but in his head, he was a famous rock star or a performer, and he stood on there and he would wave and smile and wave like the crowd was applauding him as he would walk by all these cars. And he did it for years.

Now obviously he was bonkers, right?

But it didn't matter. He believed it. So functionally, it was the same for him in this life.

We're the same way.

You contrast that with a poor man. Now, Jesus, when he begins to tell the story of the poor man, he gives him a name, and his name was Lazarus.

That's Hebrew for God has helped us.

And Jesus was deliberate about giving him this name because it would have been really easy for Lazarus in that moment. In the same way, the rich man defined himself by his wealth and his fortune and his possessions, it would have been really easy for Lazarus to have defined himself by his wounds,

by his poverty or his sores, that he has forgotten that I'm a victim, that I'm rejected.

No one cares about me.

That's not what happens.

Jesus says he calls him Lazarus.

His man's identity wasn't in his poverty or his sores,

but it was in God helped us.

His identity was anchored that he belonged to a God who was fiercely protective of him.

So what happens is Lazarus dies, and it says that he was carried away to the side of Father Abraham.

Now, to be brought into the side of Father Abraham, I don't want you to miss this. Anytime that you hear in scripture, especially in the Old Testament, that you are at Abraham's bosom or by the side of Abraham, what that means is you are being fully absorbed into God's family.

He's saying you belong to me, that you are the recipient of God's covenant promises. The covenant promises that he made to Abraham and his children and his children's children. And this is Lazarus right here.

And when you were a part of Abraham, you weren't there just because you were part of his ancestry. The rich man was part of his ancestry. You were part of Abraham by faith.

You believed in the promise that was given to Abraham.

And that was Lazarus.

So the gospel it makes our identity a matter of first importance.

And the reason it does that, because it knows that who we are determines everything about how we are.

And this passage shows us this, our understanding, and don't miss this, our understanding of who we are is always determined by whose we are,

who we belong to,

who has claimed us? What have we given ourselves to?

My wife's name was, before I married her, she was Sharla Lamply.

Until the day we got married in Sharla, she took on my name.

And having the same name, we were making a statement. What we were saying is that this was the primary redefining relationship of our life. That she belongs to me, I belong to her.

Like our primary defining relationship has now changed. Now I want you to imagine on that day, if we had gotten married, we'd go through the ceremony, we'd go on a reception, we'd go out to leave, I'm like, "Charlotte, let's go on our honeymoon." She goes, "Yeah, in just a minute, I'm gonna go on a date though. This guy asked me out." Like, "Huh?"

Like, "No, of course not. Of course she's not gonna do that."

The reason being is that doesn't make sense.

I belong to her; she belonged to me. And it shaped everything about the trajectory of our life.

And the most primary relationship we have in this world is with God.

He is our creator.

He defines what we are, how we are, where we are, why we are, how long we are.

So when we hear that, of course, I know this, and I read this parable. I know that I'm like, I know what I'm about. I wanna be by Abraham's side.

So when I read this story, I identify with Lazarus.

He's my guy.

Here's a little pro tip for you. When you read any story or any parable in the Bible,

when they are written not to be pep talks,

these parables are not written to be moral roadmaps. They aren't to show us the rungs on the ladder that we need to climb in order of self-improvement. It's not Jesus trying to do his best Tony Robbins.

These parables in these stories they are crafted to be mirrors.

They are crafted to reveal and show us our need for a savior, period. So to that end, when you read this story, when you're trying to find the person or character with whom you are supposed to identify, here's a little helper. Find the worst guy in the story.

Find the Pharisee.

Find the tax collector.

Find the one standing in the back yelling, crucify him! That's what's aimed at that part of our heart.

Because those places are the only ones that will show an honest x-ray of our spiritual condition.

So when we read this story, the person we're supposed to identify with is the rich man.

Does that make you uncomfortable?

As if it does, and it makes me uncomfortable. We have to lean in a little bit. Because it's hard.

Because it's not that we don't want to see that about ourselves.

Much like Lazarus, or the rich man rather, we can't see that about ourselves.

We are blind to ourselves. Our sin blinds us to the reality of ourselves, just like that blind rich man. The guy who was literally in Hades on fire, yelling out,

Father Abraham. And Abraham's like, I ain't your father. And Abraham's like, I ain't your father.

Do you see?

We're so committed to the delusion that we build of ourselves in our own sin. And that's why the gospel, when we read stories like that, it's when they hold up these mirrors, it forces us to recognize this place, these places in our own hearts.

Our needs.

Because that's the only way we can recognize our need for salvation.

The Holy Spirit comes and it stirs my heart when I read things like that, or I sing hymns, or I reflect in prayer, or I sit and listen to me, or listen to somebody else. The Holy Spirit moves in our hearts.

And I realize that I am the rich man.

That I am indifferent so often to the suffering that's laying at my gate.

That I am so committed to these false ideas that I will build, that I want the world to see, that I'm committed to the ways that I am. The ways that I'm wealthy, or the ways that I'm, I can just numb the pain.

I'm the rich man.

I'm the rich man that I will take anything that makes me look good all day long, and I will insulate myself, rather than admit my need.

See, that's when we begin to admit our need, though, and that place in our own hearts, that's where the tires of grace, that's the gravel under the tires of grace. And that's when it begins to catch.

When we realize I'm not the hero of the story, I'm not the hero of the story,

we deserve the rich man's punishment.

But the beautiful thing about the gospel and where Jesus takes us in this is here.

Jesus came to save the unfaithful, not the faithful.

Jesus came, his grace isn't like me in ninth grade, standing in the outside of the circle, begging that someone would pick me.

What Jesus's grace is, I'm on the outside of the circle, sprinting the other direction, picking everything else but Jesus.

And he chases me down.

Scripture tells us that before the foundations of the world, you know that part that says, in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth? Before that, God chose you. He knew you when you were knit together in your mother's womb.

Before the foundations of the world, he picked you, and he comes and he lives his life and he lives his perfect life, and when he climbs onto the cross, what does he do? He took the rich man's punishment.

He suffered the chasm between him and the father.

He felt the isolation and loneliness.

From the cross, Jesus yelled out, "I thirst."

And they tried to feed him vinegar.

He would become nameless, isolated, and thirsty, why?

So you and I, we didn't have to be. We didn't have to be.

It tells us when Jesus stepped from the grave and we accept him, the Holy Spirit moves, Galatians 4. It says, "God sent forth his son." Why? "So that we might receive adoptions as sons."

And because we are sons, God sent the spirit of his son in our hearts, a spirit that cries out, "Abba, father, daddy, daddy."

That is the cry of our hearts by the spirit.

And like Lazarus by faith, we are taken to the side of Abraham. We are now in God's family.

I am a brother of Christ.

I am given a new name. You are given a new name, it says in Isaiah. Isn't that crazy?

You're given a new name. You are an heir.

Once isolated, you are now a son and daughter of the king. Once building your own kingdoms, you're now a part of an eternal kingdom.

Ah man, isn't that beautiful?

It is such a hard reality to stay in, isn't it? To live like that every day, it's hard for me. But that's why you come here.

That's why we come here, because we had that spirit in here that testifies to our heart when you listen to me or we read the scripture, or we sing our songs. What happens is we're standing there and God lifts his eyes and he sees us, and he passes the ball to your feet.

Says, "You belong to me.

Come on in. You belong to me."

He comes back again and again and again.

My friend Jim and I was telling you about,

he's a pastor, and he lives north of here. We're still very close. Two years ago, he called me and he tells me, he said, "I have this, having these weird feelings in my hand, I went to the doctor and I just found out I have ALS."

Lou Gehrig's disease, I don't know if you know what that is, but it's a disease that kills the muscles in your body, and your body just kind of shuts down all around you. And eventually it takes your life.

And last Wednesday, I got a call from his wife, and his wife said, "Jim is unresponsive, but he's coming in and out." And he asked if you would come and give him last rites.

So I drove up and I sat by his bedside. I served communion to his family, and as I was putting the mark of the cross on his forehead,

the lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming eye, was a dirty, hot mess. I was crying.

And after the last rites, I was leaving, and Jim he threw a weak voice, he looked up, and he asked me, I said, "Would you sing at my funeral?"

And I said, "Of course, of course I'll sing at your funeral in one condition." He said, "What is that?" I said, "Can I be a candle lighter?"

He said, "Yeah."

So I got a call last night, the gym died of 645 and it was so sad.

It was so sad, but it was a sorrow wrapped in hope and joy and expectation because I know this, my friend was adopted by Jesus years ago. And because he was adopted by Jesus, he knew what it meant to see the people on the outside, and he called my name, and through that, I was adopted into that family. And I know my brother lives just as we will live, and that when I cross through the gates of heaven,

I will feel a ball at my feet and I will see my brother again.

We are adopted. You are children of the Most High.

Nothing can change that. You can't even change that.

May we live in the realities of our adoption

as men and women who are free and loved and are not yet at our home.

Amen.