

“Seeing Lazarus”

September 29, 2019

Luke 16:19-31

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Last week we read a parable that posed significant challenges, not the least of which was the apparent command to imitate the scrupulous behavior of a dishonest steward. This week’s lesson is crystal clear in its message even though we may feel very uncomfortable with its instruction. This parable drives home Luke’s concern for faithful stewardship of goods and justice in the balancing of the scales; those who have suffered in need are made full, and those who have reveled in excess are empty.

This parable made a man with three doctoral degrees (one in medicine, one in theology, one in philosophy) leave civilization with all of its culture and amenities and departs for the jungles of darkest Africa. This parable persuaded a man, who was recognized as one of the best concert organists in all of Europe, go to a place where there were no organs to play. This parable so intensely motivated a man that he gave up a teaching position in Vienna, Austria to go and deal with people who were so deprived that they were still living in the superstitions of the dark ages for all practical purposes, the man who I am talking about, of course, is Dr. Albert Schweitzer. And the single parable that so radically transformed him is our text for this morning: the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus.

Through this parable Jesus has more to say to us than how we use our wealth. Jesus speaks about perception and recognition. The Rich Man and Lazarus were neighbors, you know. They saw each other every day. Oh, not socially, but there was contact. Every day the Rich Man saw this beggar at his front gate, but did he.

This parable is filled with contrasts and reversals. The rich man was dressed in purple and fine linen, Lazarus was covered with sores. The rich man feasted sumptuously, Lazarus longed for the crumbs from the rich man’s table. Yet in this parable the poor man is named and the rich man is not. The rich man has a proper burial, while Lazarus is carried away by angels.

Just like the rich man who passed by Lazarus every day and never really saw him, we can miss perceiving with empathy. We often ignore the reality of people in desperate need. Sometimes their needs are obvious – food, shelter, clothing – and sometimes they are deeper and less obvious – the need for acceptance, meaning, understanding, love, being heard and seen. In the Buffalo News just this morning there is a article about a teacher from the Ken-ton school system that confesses she saw the sexual harassment that was happening in the school during the 70’s yet said nothing other than telling the young women to steer clear from certain teachers and

certain areas of the school. The retired teacher said, “I never reported it to anyone. ...I was part of the problem.”

We may ignore people with needs, avoid looking into their eyes and listening to their stories, in hopes of escaping the pain we recognize there. We need the kind of perception that opens us to the understanding and helps us recognize that we are not so different from our siblings – we are all children of God deserving help in time of need.

A pastor preparing to preach on this passage went out to meet those who held up signs on the street corner requesting a job or financial assistance. He stopped and offered to buy their signs if they took the time to tell him their story of how they arrived at this place. He gave them a little financial help, then gave them a new sharpie and cardboard to write a new sign. Wow! He was knowable to call them by name, share their story and offer aid. These are children of God.

You have seen them, they are in our midst. Do you know their story? Do you know their name? Just a month ago we shared our all church potluck with the folks from our community who attend our monthly community meal. Our guests for our community meal are varied in need. Some need the physical meal, some need the table fellowship, some bring others who might not have a meal otherwise and some just need a listening ear. It was evident that as our guests came down the stairs to the Family Life Center, they were uncertain if they were to be included at the tables prepared. Several folks waited for permission to enter and to be recognized by one who was familiar, inviting them to join in the feast. Once they were named and invited they joined the feast. All were welcomed to the table prepared and there was not a crumb left on the table. Those bowls were scraped clean.

Each and every one in attendance that day was offered a seat at the table. We celebrated a birthday, an engagement and prayers for those who were ill. We heard stories of blessing and need. Each person was called by name. It was a powerful visualization God’s kingdom realized, where the boundaries of wealth and status were crossed. This is the kingdom of God that Jesus envisions for all God’s children.

This parable challenges us to not only share our wealth but to become more attentive to the poor and the suffering persons who are before us, who dwell on our door step, or in other parts of our town where we cannot see their suffering.

Over the past 3 years, my eyes have been opened to the needs of our community through the work of the HUB. The HUB was established to connect services with the needs of the people. Sitting at the desk as I collected the intake information needed to best help my neighbor opened my eyes to the suffering of many. I am sad to say that this resource no longer exists. Sitting at the table with the counselors from the Community Support Center opened my eyes to the homeless in our community. Listening to Jill O’Malley speak about the mission and outreach of the Ken-ton Loan Closet to the families of Kenmore Tonawanda opened my eyes to the need of affordable housing, transportation and livable wages with in our community.

Through this parable Jesus calls us to pay attention to the needs and take responsibility for it, for the sake of God who is a friend to all human kind. We are not watching a tragic movie or play where we feel the sad feelings because another is in want. In a movie the listener has no need to offer help, but merely feel sorrow. We are seeing/experiencing lives that are in need of being seen and responded to. In fact Jesus says our eternal life depends on it.

After asking for help to cool the heat or, the rich man finally understands and sees the chasm between he and Lazarus cannot be crossed, he asks maybe Lazarus could go to his siblings and warn them of the reality of Hades. Alas, Abraham, the father of faith replies, "They have Moses and the prophets, they should listen to them. If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

It appears that seeing has come too late for the rich man, but perhaps it is not too late for us. We and the five brothers still have a chance. Stepping out of our privileged life will perhaps be one of the most difficult journeys in this life, but it is the step we must take to live life eternally with God. It is not too late for us. The Lord wants us to view this life through the perspective of eternal values. We can recognize our neighbors and respond as imaginatively and graciously as God has responded to us. May we have the courage to see and do what we can because we know that our neighbors who wait - and we - are your beloved children. Amen.