

A Sermon for the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 16:19-31 --- Psalm 146

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Another Sunday morning...another parable of Jesus, read from the Gospel of Luke...another story of rich and poor...another example of what is beginning to feel like an old refrain...or maybe a broken record.

A man of wealth and privilege ignores – on his very own doorstep – a man so poor and hungry he is hoping for the crumbs left over after the dogs are fed. And both men die. The poor man is taken into heaven and right into the arms of Abraham. And the man of privilege is now ‘privileged’ to spend time in the fiery furnace. End of story...or is it the end of the story?

We could do what we are often tempted to do...to pull out our mental gardening tools (or in the case of our four-year-old grandson, our needle-nosed pliers) and do a little parable weeding...extracting the thorny bits and lopping off the offensive parts, in order that the story fits the way we think it should fit.

Rich? Why, we’re not rich! Bill Gates, and Warren Buffet, the Koch Brothers, and all the sheiks of the United Arab Emerites, and far too many of our politicians, for that matter...now they are rich. Besides, we would never let someone lie in hunger and filth and disease in our neighborhood. Maybe the rich man got exactly what he deserved. Great story...thank goodness it doesn’t apply to us. Amen.

But, my friends, we *are* rich. Relative to all the people of the earth, the rest of the children of God, we are very rich.

Joan Klaus and I had a lovely – and modest – breakfast at Otto’s yesterday. It cost us ten dollars apiece. If we were living on a food stamp budget – here in the richest nation in the world – we would have spent two days worth of food money on one small meal. We would not be eating again until tomorrow morning. We *are* rich. Never mind the fact that we have roofs over our heads and clothes on our backs and food to eat at every meal...we can buy nice wine, and go to the opera, and take a little vacation to get away from it all. I can order four books with the click of one key on my computer...and spend more in that instant than far too many people earn at their hard-working jobs in a week. I don’t believe, *really I don’t*, that we are condemned by God because we are the “haves” rather than the “have-nots.” I *do*

suspect that God must be more than a little disappointed when, as we have talked about in weeks' past, our *having* is more important to us than the loving we were created to share. And more than a little disappointed when we don't own up to the fact – and give thanks – that we have, indeed, been blessed.

So, if we cannot weed ourselves out of the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, how does it speak to us? One of the true delights of the parables is that, no matter how many times we hear the story, no matter how familiar the story becomes, no matter how convinced we are that we have seen and heard all there is to see and hear, something new just might be revealed. A gift of the Holy Spirit...this new sight and new understanding we are given.

In the middle of today's story, when Lazarus is safely with Abraham, and the rich man is both literally and figuratively in the “hot spot,” an exchange takes place, the ramifications of which I never noticed before. The rich man addresses Abraham and says, “Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony...” Send Lazarus...The words of a man who never saw Lazarus on his doorstep...who refused to see him...who overlooked and ignored him... And still he completely overlooks Lazarus, except to do his bidding. Send Lazarus for water to cool MY tongue...to alleviate MY misery. The rich man has learned absolutely nothing...for even in hell, he does not see Lazarus as a human being...just some lesser thing...to do his bidding for his own comfort.

How many people – how many human beings – how many of God's children do we refuse to truly see? How many do we pretend not to see? How many do we hope we don't have to see? When we can see those around us – on the street – in the news – across the continents, we begin to understand that they are indeed persons of value. No matter how destitute – or how dissolute for that matter. To truly see someone is to understand that we are all equal in God's sight. This seeing is, in a way, a gift of respect that we can share. It is also the conscious awareness that, while I may wear shoes from a Chicago boutique while the homeless woman on the corner is wearing rags wrapped around her feet, we are both, at our core and in our creation, people of value in God's eyes.

A very personal story from my own life speaks to seeing and not seeing. My youngest brother was born with severe and crippling birth defects. He lived his life blind, and in a wheelchair. When he was small, *everyone* saw him. Imagine if you can a wee little wheelchair, and in it sitting a sweet little boy with two skinny legs sticking straight out, bangs hanging across his forehead, and little horn-rimmed

glasses that served no practical purpose but to cover an inoperable crossed eye. The deformity of his feet made moccasins the only shoes that would work. But then, they were cute, too. Strangers stopped us in the street to speak to him and tell us what a dear little boy he was. I did not question their motives then, and I do not, now. But I will tell you that as he got older – as he grew toward manhood – he was no longer pleasing to the eye. He suffered the fate of so many who spend their lives in a wheelchair...his upper body grew to unappealing proportions while his lower body became more atrophied and twisted. Years of surgery left a web of scars on his head. And people stopped talking to him on the street – and people stopped looking at him – and, although he could not see it, people looked away. But he knew...he knew that something had gone from his life. He knew he was no longer welcomed in, but left out. He just didn't know why.

There are so many reasons we cannot truly see others...if you look – really look – into the face of the man lying dead on the street in Syria, or the damaged, swollen face in the newspaper of the three-year-old caught in the crossfire in Chicago, or the tired and angry face of the young mother dragging a crying child through the grocery store, it begins to feel as though the world is spinning out of control and we are helpless to set it to rights. If we encounter someone maimed and scarred as we walk down the street, we look away because we cannot bear the visible marks of their pain. Photojournalism, in its honest effort to make us aware of the everyday realities of living – around the corner and across the globe – has brought before our eyes so many pictures of bone-thin women sitting on the barren ground in Africa with their dead babies in their laps that we protect ourselves from unbearable grief by not looking anymore. It is all just more than we can bear.

We have become so practiced at shielding the eyes of our heart that we cannot see pain and suffering and grief and fear in the person sitting right next to us. Because, yes, we the rich have known – and will know – times of abject poverty in our lives. Death and illness and betrayal and anxiety leave us all without resources. We cannot see this emptiness in others, and we do all in our power to hide it from others when we are the ones lying cold and hungry on life's doorstep. We are honest enough with ourselves to acknowledge our inability to right every wrong, and overturn every injustice, and atone for every sin of the past. But our inability to bear the weight of the world on our shoulders is not an excuse to stop seeing Christ in all persons. Nor does it excuse us for forgetting that God's love shines through hundreds and millions and hundreds of millions of God' children...and we are only called to be one.

The rich man in the parable wanted to send the invisible Lazarus to warn his siblings what would befall them if they did not repent and change their ways. Abraham refused to offer him a Jacob Marley/Ebenezer Scrooge moment. "Between you and us a great chasm has been fixed," he tells the rich man. "Those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us." Harsh words...what's done is done...you had your chance.

Our help and our hope - our chance - plain and simple, is in the name of the Lord. In the words of this morning's Psalm, "Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God...who keeps faith forever." It is the one who speaks aloud this morning's parable - Jesus, son of God, son of Man - incarnate, living, crucified, and resurrected - who closes the very chasm the rich man can not hope to bridge...once - for always. We, in all our blindness are invited to live and love in that resurrection. At the Eucharist we are invited to partake of the bread and the wine - in remembrance that Christ died for us. "The consecrated gifts we receive are to us as a mirror, the Body of Christ in the bread as mirror to the Body of Christ, in us - the church," says the liturgist Louis Weil. "If we do not *see* Christ in the people around us, we cannot claim to see him in the consecrated gifts."

It would seem that God believes in us, because in the Eucharist we are invited into the work of closing the chasms *created by humankind* that separate the children of God on earth. We are invited to continue in the generous work we have begun...in the ongoing covenantal relationship with Glory Parish in South Sudan that you read about in this week's Grace news. I commend to you the DVD of Bishop Lee's trip to the diocese of Renk, so that you might meet - in a personal way - some of the brave and joy-filled people of Glory Parish. So you might truly see the face of a woman whose six sons were killed in war, and yet who looks right into the camera and proclaims God's blessings. So that you might meet brothers and sisters who are unabashedly grateful for the gifts they receive from people like us - and who are unabashedly generous in their daily prayers for us...a gift we *always* need and the gift they have to give.

We are invited into a new relationship with the people who are the parish of Santa Cruz in Oaxaca, Mexico - people who live in poverty and constant threat of the spilling over of violence of warring drug lords. Invited into a relationship not based on their need and our ability to give, but one in which we see them as men and women and children who are - like us - people of God...whose warmth and generosity, like our own, arise from hearts full of God's grace. We are invited to greet the stranger - if only with a smile...to afford respect to our foes, no matter how contrary their opinions and actions and intentions may be to our own.

We are invited to look at one another with new eyes – eyes that see and affirm that we all struggle and we all stumble – eyes that convey love and caring, when words fail us. We are invited to get over ourselves – to at least try to understand that no amount of riches nor, for that matter, no amount of suffering, could make us more valued in God's eyes than we already are. God's is a love that is boundless – for all of creation and for each and every one of us. There is nothing we can do to earn more...there is nothing we can do to deserve more...there is nothing we can do to lose what has already been given. And it is in the knowing and feeling and cherishing of God's boundless love we *all* receive that we are set free to love – to see – to really see – one another.