

To See or Not to See
Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Luke 16:19-31

Jesus is nearing the end of his journey to Jerusalem. Feeling that his disruption of the status quo can only be tolerated for so much longer, he has an important goal in mind for the rest of his journey. He wants to make sure his followers understand how to build their lives on the foundation of his teachings.

Living a life of Gospel love and justice can be dangerous... we will be asked to re-evaluate every part of our lives and make it measure up to God's standard. We do this not in order to earn God's love, but to better reflect this love more fully into the world.

Today's scripture, a story about a rich, nameless man and an impoverished man named Lazarus, is all about how to re-orient our lives to be a reflection of God's love.

It begins by describing two men who could not be more different. One was very wealthy and always decked out in the finest clothes: head to toe purple and linen. He had so much money that every meal was a feast. He lived in a home big enough to have it's own gate.

And, at that gate, lay another other man, Lazarus. Covered in sores, head to toe with purple and red angry welts. Here was a man so hungry that he WISHED he could eat the scraps that had fallen from the rich man's table. He had no home, living among the stray dogs at the rich man's gate. No one seems to see him.

Both men die.

The poor man, once ignored, is now tended by angels. He is taken into the bosom of Abraham, where the great ancestor of his faith offers him love and comfort that he did not have in his earthly life.

The wealthy man was buried, which is another symbol of his wealth. But as it turns out, a big funeral would be the last thing that goes well for him.

Remember, in Luke, when a soon-to-be pregnant Mary sang about how God who would bring down the powerful from their thrones and lift up the lowly?

And remember how often Jesus preached about the poor being blessed, saying that the rich would become hungry?

This rich man experiences just such a reversal of fortune. Having lived in comfort, his death is marked by isolation and torment. Having always had more than enough to eat and drink, he now begs for even the smallest drops of water to ease his pain. This man who never crossed his yard to tend to the sick one at his gate now suffers alone. A great chasm separates him from the ones who might offer comfort.

Before we go further, I'd like to share something that one of the scholars I read this week pointed out. We would be wise to avoid seeing this story as Jesus saying all rich people are terrible and deserve punishment.

I believe it is more helpful to read this parable as a critique of a particular understanding of the relationship between wealth and righteousness.

Jesus is poking away at a theology that understood one's wealth as a sign of one's righteousness, sort of like gifts from God for good behavior. Those who espoused this theology might have assumed that the rich man was rich because he was righteous; and would have expected him to be one curled up in Abraham's embrace. To see him being tormented because, to quote the scripture, he had already received good things, would have completely upended some people's understanding of God.

This reversal certainly got the attention of the rich man! He becomes so convinced that he must have done something wrong that he even tries to find a way to warn his siblings to change their ways before it was too late.

But Abraham says no, the evidence is sound, they shouldn't need more. If they don't believe that, they won't believe anything... even the testimony of a dead man brought back to life!

In this... Jesus is clear. Material success in our life is not a sign of how much God loves us. Likewise, the tragedies and misfortunes that some

experience are not always signs of something for which they are being punished. Our relative privilege should not insulate us from seeing the pain of our neighbors, some of who sit on our very doorstep, struggling to survive.

We don't have to be like the rich man who came to this realization that he could serve his neighbors only after it was too late. We are here, now, like his five siblings, alive and still able to listen to the witness before us. We can choose to live life differently.

As Jesus warned us in other parts of Luke, living a new life can be risky and disruptive. We may have to re-examine all parts of our lives and institutions in order to shape them into the standard of God's love. We should have no doubt that this will be really hard. We'll mess up and apologize and start over again.

To really see someone is to notice them, to feel compassion for them, to act out of that compassion and help alleviate their suffering.

I'm sorry to say that there have been moments in my life when I've seen people in need and done nothing. I wish now that I had made a different choice. Like with that frustrated parent in the grocery store speaking harshly to a sticky-faced, tantrum-riddled toddler. Or the childhood friend who dropped strange hints about what it is like to be in relationship with someone with a "temper". Or that family member who has been photographed with a drink in his hand a few too many times.

Our responsibility extends far beyond the limited confines of our families or social groups. We cannot close our eyes to the plight of the victims of oppression and war. We still have time to be faithful to what the gospel teaches: The well-being of others, especially the poor and oppressed, is indeed our business.

What we can't do anymore is sit at our table eating dinner while ignoring the dying man outside.

In the closing scene of this parable, the rich man and Lazarus are finally seeing each other – as if for the first time. Here is the good news: if we are attentive to the presence of the kingdom of God, we just might see one another in the here and now!

In this life we can cross all of those divides that separate us. Every time one of us packs a meal at St. George's community supper or helps a refugee family get on its feet, that chasm becomes a little less significant.

Every time one of us visits a shut-in, or cooks a meal for an exhausted caregiver, that chasm becomes a little easier to cross.

Every time one of us reaches out to read or tutor at an under-resourced school, that chasm becomes a little less important.

Every time we are brave enough to extend a helping hand to someone else, to give generously and risk relationship and reconciliation, that chasm is erased.

We just might discover that those we serve are our brothers and sisters, and that they have something to teach us.

In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells us these words: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me, hungry and you fed me, a prisoner and you visited me."

So let's try it. Let's go out from here with new eyes, really seeing those whom God calls us to see. Amen.