

“I Told You”

A sermon preached by

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Luke 16:19-31

¹⁹“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²²The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴He called out, ‘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 in these flames.’ ²⁵But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. ²⁶Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’ ²⁷He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house— ²⁸for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ ²⁹Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ ³⁰He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ ³¹He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

My parents met and fell in love while going to school in Chicago. So even though we lived in western and central Michigan when I was growing up, we often came into the city to shop, go to museums, or check out the places my parents would go when they were college kids. Coming from Michigan meant that we would always drive through Gary, Indiana on the Skyway.

Compared to the late 1950s and early 1960s, Gary today looks like the Botanic Garden. The EPA hadn’t been created, clean air and water legislation hadn’t been passed, and the steel mills were in full operation pumping out pollutants at an alarming and palpable rate. So as we approached Gary, even though we didn’t have air conditioning in the car, we’d be told to roll up our windows and wait until we got past Hammond before we could open the windows again. My grandfather had worked in a drop forge in Lansing, Michigan for much of his life, so the idea that people worked in places like Gary’s steel mills wasn’t new to me. But what I never thought about during many of those trips back and forth from Michigan was that people were actually living there.

Years later my brother lived and worked in Gary as a Vista volunteer, and when I came to Evanston I met some First Church members who had grown up there. One of them, Ron Gearing, a long time teacher at ETHS, tells the story of coming to Evanston as a kid and being kicked off the public beaches here because he was African American.

Sometimes it takes proximity or a mission trip or just a kick in the behind to come to a realization that life for others can be startlingly different from our childhoods, our neighborhoods, our worlds. The truth is that seeing or at least noticing another human being is sometimes not as easy as we might guess. We drive by neighborhoods and schools, we gaze at videos of war-torn regions of the world, we read that children are in desperate need of housing, clothing, and nutrition...and yet somehow we fail to see.

Perhaps that is the beginning point of the gospel story this morning. The sin of the rich man is that he did not see Lazarus. Or at least he did not see him as more than an extension of himself. For if he had seen him for all that he was: once an infant and a boy, a brother, a husband, a father, a grandfather; if he had seen him as one with hopes and hurts, dreams and disappointments; if he had seen him as one beloved by God, then perhaps he would have ministered to his needs at the gate.

When I hear this story, I know that on any given day it speaks of me. I know that I am sometimes, perhaps all the time, like the rich man. And I also know that occasionally I have been on both sides of the seeing and not being seen.

In her commentary on this passage, Alyce McKenzie writes that unlike other parables, this one does not stay in the realm of first-century village life. It spans this life and the next. It is realistic in its portrayal of the vast gap between rich and poor. The image of a poor man waiting for crumbs at the gate of the rich man is a vision taken straight from ancient life. And yet sadly it still speaks to 21st century life as well. For the hearers of Jesus' time there wouldn't have been as much sympathy for the poor man as we feel today, because there was a widespread belief that wealth was a sign of God's favor and poverty a sign of sin. So the reversal of fortunes that Jesus tells is a challenge to that way of thinking.

Trying to make sense of this kind of income inequity isn't new to this year's presidential race. It is indeed an ancient quest that goes back to folk tales from Egypt and the rabbinic traditions of Judaism. Some rabbinic tales feature Eliezer (Greek *Lazaros*) walking in disguise on the earth and reporting back to Abraham on how his children are observing the Torah's

prescriptions regarding the treatment of the widow, the orphan, and the poor. In Jesus' story Lazaros become Lazarus but the focus remains the same.

This parable is found only in Luke. It underscores a theme expressed near the beginning of the Gospel, when Mary sings that God has "put down the mighty from" their thrones and exalted those of low degree. The story is a three-act play. The first act portrays the earthly contrast between the wealthy man and Lazarus. The second act describes the reversal of their conditions in the afterlife. The third act depicts the rich man's request to Father Abraham for a sign so that those still living can avoid his torment, a request that Abraham refuses.

The rich man's sin was not that he was rich but that, during his earthly life, he did not "see" Lazarus, despite his daily presence at the entrance to his home. The first time he ever sees Lazarus is when, from Hades "he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side."

As for Lazarus, we aren't told he was pious but his name means "God helps," which implies righteousness. Lazarus's hunger and willingness to eat whatever was at hand are reminiscent of the prodigal son's famished, desperate condition.

What is it that causes us to not really see others? I'm sure we can all point to places where that has worked or not worked in our lives. What are some hints that we can look for? This parable is one of several in Luke that shows us that God shows up when and where we least expect it. We don't expect the realm of God to be displayed in the gap between the luxurious living conditions of some and the inhumane living conditions of others. But this realm of God is not a prisoner to our expectations.

Too, too often, others are simply invisible to us. As those who lived in Gary so many years ago. As you may have felt when someone ignored you. As Lazarus was to the rich man --- and no doubt to countless others --- as he sat and begged at the gate.

So perhaps this parable gives us the truth that this is not how it is meant to be. At the end of the story, we are reminded once again that seeing the un-seeable, caring for the disenfranchised, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, setting the oppressed free are not only marks of discipleship or acts that contribute to the reality of the coming presence of God in our midst. They are not just good works; instead they are moments of resurrection. They bring the dead to life.

That I think is what Luke is trying to convey with his tongue in cheek reference to the resurrection at the end of the parable. “Neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.” This is the difference between life and death, heaven and hell. We don’t live because we are being threatened with the flames of some mythic location of torment, we live when we see the unseen, feed the unfed, clothe the naked. This is resurrection...this is life.