

With God, Can We See?

King of Glory Lutheran
Year C: Pentecost 16 Luke 16:19-31
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This isn't a story about hell or about eternal life. It is a story about Jesus' ongoing work in naming and claiming those who society doesn't see. The rejected ones have names and identities. Does our faith in the One who came back from the dead, help us to see all people?

Luke 16:19-31

The Rich Man and Lazarus - 'There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He 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." But 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. Besides 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." He said, "Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house— for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment." Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them." He said, "No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent." He 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." '

We've all seen him. We've all seen her. She stands at the bottom of the exit ramp holding her sign. "Homeless Vet. Three kids. Anything helps." He lays on his newspaper – far cry from a soft blanket - with a trash bag next to his side which holds all his earthly belongings.

We've all seen them. And when we do, there are questions and feelings and attitudes and values that rise up within our beings. Depending how and where we were raised our reactions might be totally different.

Some of us might think, "How can I help, there are so many!"

Some of us might think, "Go get a job!"

Some of us might reach for a couple of dollar bills.

Some of us might stare straight ahead, thinking, "If I don't make eye contact, driving by will be easier."

The rich man in Jesus' parable is very, very rich. He dresses in expensive purple clothing and feasts every day, the crumbs of which Lazarus could only dream of filling his empty stomach. And every day, this rich man, passes by Lazarus at the gate of his huge mansion. Staring straight ahead, not making eye contact, he disregards Lazarus' pleading eyes. He ignores Lazarus' cries for help when the dirty, unclean street dogs lick his open wounds.

Then both men die. Death comes to all of us. Rich and poor alike. And in the afterlife, Lazarus is resting peacefully with Father Abraham, while the rich man is tormented in the place of the dead.

The rich man treats Lazarus as he did while he was living. He treats Lazarus as a nobody, no good, subservient human being who can only meet his needs. "Hey, Abraham, can he come here and give me a drop of water?"

Abraham refuses the request noting the great chasm fixed between the two. And when pushed to send a message about this place of death back to the rich man's brothers, Abraham also refuses. "They've had Moses and the prophets tell them how to live. If they haven't figured it out already, they won't even listen to a dead man who comes back to life."

It was common folk belief in Jesus' time that there would be reversals of wealth and poverty in the afterlife. These folks stories were plentiful. (*NT. Wright. Luke for Everyone. Westminster John Knox Press. Louisville, Kentucky. 2004. Pg 200.*) But in all of those stories, a message was always allowed to come back from the afterlife, to those still living, that they might be warned to change their ways.

Not this time! By Jesus' telling the story this way, Jesus' hearers would've been surprised. And in doing so, He was pushing them to think.

We have to remember that parables use fanciful, stretched out language and ideas to make a point. Yet they usually point to Jesus' mission and ministry. This isn't a story about heaven and hell. It isn't a story about what happens to rich people when they die. It is a story about Jesus and his interactions with humanity in that present time. Would people see? Would people see one another? Would people see Jesus as the one to come back from the dead?

The Pharisees loved their money. Listen again to the verses prior which introduce this parable. "The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, ridiculed (Jesus). So he said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts, for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God. The law and the prophets were in effect until John came; since then the goods news of the Kingdom of God is proclaimed.." (Luke 16:14-16a)

This parable is about the now! It's about the Kingdom of God. Will those money loving Pharisees actually see Jesus, the one who is bringing God's Kingdom? Oh, they don't like the people Jesus spent time with. Sinners. Prostitutes. Lepers. People named Lazarus.

But in the story, the rich name doesn't have a name. Lazarus, the poor man, does. Jesus is lifting up a societal no-body, because Lazarus was some-body. He had a name. He had a life. He had his own struggles. Money didn't define him. God did.

On several mission trips with youth at other congregations, we've served meals to the homeless. In doing our pre-work, we ask the youth to think about the people they'll be interacting with. There are normal fears. "I've never met a homeless person!" "Where do they live?" "Do they have families?" "What should I say?"

And yet, over and over again the students were transformed by the experience. "I was talking to this one guy and he told me about his sister. She lives in another state and sends him money every month. It's his only income."

"I talked to a woman named Sarah and she grew up in poverty. Her parents didn't have jobs, they were dirt poor. She's never known another way of life. It's like a bad cycle!"

Nameless homeless people became humans with stories. No-bodies become some-bodies. With names. With faces and identities.

No longer was there a fixed chasm between two groups of people –people living in homes and people living on the streets. The chasm had ended when blindness became sight.

Do we see? Do we see how Jesus walked and talked with everyone? Do we see how He was the fulfillment of the law and the prophets; the One coming into the world to change it? Do we see God's kingdom come through Jesus' life and ministry with the blind, the lame, the hungry and homeless, the rich and the poor? He is the one dead man who comes back to life! And our faith in Him and with Him can change every interaction we have.

If we see it that way!

Oh it's easy enough to put our labels on folks by what they wear, their political inkling, where they live. God doesn't see those things. God sees people, humans, children of God in need of grace, just like each one of us!

And for we who gather to worship a God of new beginnings, to eat a meal of forgiveness, to live into a new way of life by following Jesus, and hear the testimony of One who rose from the dead – does this make a difference in how we see others? Or not?

Does Jesus' testimony help us regard every human as a person deserving of compassion and holy regard.....or not?

Here's a faithful way to see what is true for each of us. We don't even have to go out of our homes to find out. Grab the morning paper or your iPhone and as you read the news stories, try to pray. See if you can pray for the person just sentenced to prison. Pray for the people in the Bahamas who have lost their earthly belongings. Discover how it feels to try to pray for politicians who don't believe what you believe.

As you do so, reflect on what's happening inside. If you don't want to pray, think about why. Are attitudes from your past holding you back? Are there assumptions that come with particular groups of people? Read the story again and try to pray as God or Jesus would see each individual in that story: a person with a name, a job, a life, joys and challenges. See them as God might see them.

In God's Kingdom, there are no societal no-bodies, only some bodies. There are no people who are supposed to be subservient to others. There are only children of God resting in the bosom and lap of God. Jesus has told us so.

Can we see it?

Amen!