

## Blind Spots

King of Glory Lutheran

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Generosity Appeal: Week 2

Luke 16: 19-31 [Jesus said:] <sup>19</sup>“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. <sup>20</sup>And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, <sup>21</sup>who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. <sup>22</sup>The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. <sup>23</sup>In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. <sup>24</sup>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.’ <sup>25</sup>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. <sup>26</sup>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.’ <sup>27</sup>He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house—<sup>28</sup>for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ <sup>29</sup>Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ <sup>30</sup>He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ <sup>31</sup>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.’”

Please pray with me. Gracious God, please help us see our neighbors without turning away. Amen.

He came up to me with a tone of anger in his voice. I had just finished leading a prayer prior to a church dinner. Because I wanted the prayer to be accessible for all the children and parents, we had prayed the old familiar, “Come Lord Jesus, be our guest, and let this food to us be blessed.”

In a frustrated voice, he asked, “Do you know the rest of that prayer?” I admitted I did not. He recited it for me, “Come Lord Jesus, be our guest, and let this food to us be blest. Blessed be God who is our bread, may all the world, be clothed and fed.”

“We cannot pray for just our food. Americans always only pray for what they want. What they need. God doesn’t only provide for us. But there are hungry children and adults all over the world who need food. They need our prayers! We must broaden our view to help them get the food and shelter they need.”

He was very emphatic. I’ll admit, as a young pastor, I never had anyone criticize my prayers before. But as a former missionary in a third-world country, this member, clearly understood what I did not. God calls us to see and pray for all people’s needs, not simply our own.

The un-named rich man had the same blind spot I did. In ancient times, there was a bench outside of rich men’s homes. The poor would come and sit on the benches. It was the duty of the rich to come out and provide some sustenance for the person on the bench. This would provide honor to the wealthy man and food for the poor person; unable to buy their own food.

The text doesn’t tell us if the rich man saw Lazarus. It doesn’t say if the rich man ignored him. We only know Lazarus would have hungrily and gladly eaten anything from the table of the rich man. Instead, day after day, he lay in front of the rich man’s house, with only the dirty street dogs to 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.

In the ancient world there were many a folk story where in the after-life, fortunes would be reversed. If you’d been rich, when you die, you’d become poor and vice versa. Jesus says, Lazarus is resting easy on Abraham’s bosom. While apparently whatever power the rich man had during life, he still thinks he can flaunt around now.

“Father Abraham, tell Lazarus to bring me a cold drop of water!”

“No, that can’t happen. There is a great chasm between us that cannot be crossed.”

“Well then, go tell my five brothers, so they don’t have to suffer like I am suffering.”

Here’s where the story – as Jesus tells it – would have shocked his hearers. In the usual folk tale, the request to have someone go back to earth would have been

granted. Yet Father Abraham doesn't grant that request. What's done has been done. There is nothing more that can be done.

This apocalyptic parable serves as a wake-up call for those listening to Jesus; his disciples and those who might want to follow him. Parables served the purpose of painting picture stories about Jesus' ministry. He used them to make a point.

Who was listening to Jesus? If we go back just a few verses prior to our story, we read: (Lk 16:14-16) The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him. <sup>15</sup>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. <sup>16</sup>The law and the prophets were in effect until John came; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is proclaimed..."

Jesus is giving the Pharisees and any who wish to listen a warning. What is the last line of the parable? "neither, will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'" Who will be that risen One?

And in the previous chapter, in the parable of the Prodigal Son, the older brother refuses to come into the party for his younger brother who had been feasting on what the pigs ate. What is the father's line? "Your brother was dead, but now is alive again!"

The older brother and the rich man don't want to see, don't want to be bothered by unsightly, smelly neighbors; exactly those who Jesus loves to hang out with. The Pharisees are increasingly upset Jesus is eating with, is healing, is being friendly towards 'sinners and the outcasts.' He is living out in the present what was widely believed would happen in the future world. This role reversal of the outcasts being welcomed was a sign of the inbreaking Kingdom of God! "On earth, as in heaven."

Here in Loveland, we are having a community conversation about the Lazarus' of this world. For they too seek shelter. They too, need food to eat. Thus a semi-permanent shelter is to be built for the homeless to live in. The opinions about this idea are many and varied. Some downtown business owners don't feel safe. Others are ready to try the idea. Others speak a narrative that goes like this...if you build it, they will come. More and more of those kind of people, will come.

Retired ELCA Pastor Chuck Hubbard stood up at the public meeting at the Rialto and said, “I go bike riding down where the encampment is. I want to check on folks and see how they are. One day, a few of them told me that they get rocks thrown at them. It’s not only the homeless that can at times cause trouble. It is we who are housed who can be mean as well.”

How are we doing at welcoming sinners and outcasts? We are one – a sinner yes? Then how are we doing at welcoming sinners and outcasts? Do we consciously or unconsciously choose not to see them? Do we think, “Oh, someone else will take care of them.” Perhaps our narrative goes more like this: “Why don’t they get a job? Everyone else does!”

One of the city employees who spoke said, “I’ve never met a homeless person, who at one time in their life didn’t have a house. They’ve all been housed at some point in their life.” If we believe Jesus’ command to love God through loving our neighbor, then it is ‘God’s work our hands’, to feed them, to see them, to know their names. No we cannot fix the whole problem ourselves, individually or corporately. Yet, we are called to see the one who lands on our bench.

The rich man is universal because he doesn’t have a name. Lazarus... smelly, homeless, hungry, has a name so we realize he is a person in God’s sight. In the kingdom to come, the Lazarus’ of this world may just get moved from under the railroad tracks to the best seat at the table.

How are we doing at seeing Lazarus? The first step is to ask their name. The second step is to offer help, not out of pity, but out of honor in serving Jesus on earth.

I fully realize that we might be at all different stages in our comfort level with homeless people. So if we can’t do any of that... if it’s too hard; our blind spot won’t let us see them at all, then we go back to the beginning and simply start to pray. “Blessed be God who is our bread; may all the world be clothed and fed.”

Amen

Some ideas were taken from *NT. Wright. Luke for Everyone. Westminster John Knox Press. Louisville, Kentucky. 2004. Pg 200-201.*