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Opening and Seeing
Pentecost 17, c, September 30, 2007
Luke 16:19-31

Jesus' words can make us squirm. The poor. We know that there is great disparity between the wealthy and the poor. But we don't like to dwell on it. The statistics overwhelm us: between 15 million and 20 million people die of starvation or hunger-related illness each year. Today - today - over 40,000 people will starve, 30,000 of them children. Over 1 billion people on earth live in a state of absolute poverty.

For the most part, we feel helpless to do anything about such massive need, so we try not to think about it at all. We might give occasionally to relief efforts for famine. We might donate some old clothes to the homeless shelter. We might make a contribution to Micah 6, the United Way or some other charity, but for the most part, we tend to keep our distance from poverty.

The rich man in the parable was no different. He didn't like to be reminded of what was ugly and painful in life. He built high walls around his estate to keep out the undesirables. Inside was everything that was beautiful, nice and pleasing to the eye. Outside was everything that was unpleasant, miserable and unclean.

With a few bold images, Jesus painted a vivid picture of this rich man. His undergarment of fine linen was made of an expensive Egyptian product that was called "woven air." It was the same fabric used to bind

the mummified bodies of the Pharaohs, and was prized as highly as gold. His outer garments were purple, the color which signified royalty or extreme wealth, for the dye had to be meticulously extracted from oyster shells and was prohibitively expensive to all but the most wealthy. And he feasted, feasted sumptuously every day. He had made it to the top of the economic ladder - someone who lived with wealth and indulgent prosperity.

Then with equal clarity, Jesus painted the image of Lazarus lying at the rich man's gate. In the NT's Greek, the verb implies that he was flung there with contempt and roughness to beg for crumbs from the wealthy man's table. The word for gate, "pylon" intensifies the sense of contrast between Lazarus and the rich man for it was used to describe a gate of magnificent artistry and exquisite beauty offering a hint of the opulence of the estate inside the gates. The gate and mansion provide a startling backdrop for Lazarus' pitiful plight.

He lay there day after day, covered with oozing sores, begging for the scraps of bread which fell from the rich man's table. He was sick, starving and filthy, a pitiful sight which no doubt moved passersby to throw a few coins in his cup, but also to quickly walk away lest they have to smell him or look into his eyes. It's not hard to imagine the rich man avoiding Lazarus at his gate. It was not a pleasant sight.

With a few descriptive phrases, Jesus strikingly portrayed the discrepancy between the lives of the rich man and Lazarus. Then he shifted the narrative to death, the great equalizer. Both men died. The rich man was buried and though the scripture doesn't give us any detail, we know that his status in life would have afforded him a lavish funeral. On the other hand, because of his poverty and status as one unclean and

outcast, Lazarus' body would have been thrown naked onto the fires outside the city walls where the garbage was burned.

But the next scene in the drama reveals a startling reversal in their positions. Lazarus was side by side with Abraham in heaven! The rich man is in the agony of flames in Hades. Lazarus is on the inside and the rich man is on the outside looking across a great chasm, begging for mercy.

Jesus teaches that after this earthly life things get rearranged and those who appeared to be powerful and on top of it all sometimes find themselves on the bottom; and those who were weak and powerless sometimes find themselves on top. In the kingdom of God, appearances pass away and the truth about life is revealed. It is evident who is close to God and who is far away.

Several interpretations have been offered for the reversal of the circumstances between Lazarus and the rich man. Some have said that it is a great squaring of accounts. The rich man got what he deserved. The implication is **that there is something inherently wrong** with being rich and that those who are rich in life will be punished and those who are poor and miserable in life will be rewarded. But that's too simplistic an understanding and doesn't take into account father Abraham, in whose arms Lazarus is comforted. The patriarch was blessed with land, animals and great wealth. So simply having wealth is not what condemned the rich man.

Others have pointed out that this parable has sometimes been used with the **malevolent motive of reconciling the miserable to their lot**. The message is, "hang on and accept whatever life gives you and you'll be rewarded in the next life. "

In Alice Walker's book, *The Color Purple*, Celie espouses this view when she tells Sophia, her daughter-in-law, that she lets Mister beat her because this life is fleeting and she believes that in the end she'll be rewarded in heaven which lasts forever. Always one to take hold of her own destiny, Sophia tells Celie that she ought to bust Mister's head in and let heaven take care of itself!

No, there is nothing inherently good about being poor and powerless and nothing inherently evil about being rich and powerful. So what does the parable mean?

I suggest that the key to unlock the meaning of this parable is in the exchange between Abraham and the rich man.

Still used to having people at his beck and call, the rich man begs Abraham **to send Lazarus** to dip his finger in water and cool the tip of his tongue. In response, Abraham tells him to remember his life and relationship to Lazarus. Remember that he had nothing but good things; remember that Lazarus had nothing but the poorest of things. Through remembering, my bet is the rich man saw the truth of his life in relationship to Lazarus for the first time.

In life, Lazarus was powerless to bridge the distance between them - he was on the outside of the gates, looking in, longing for a share of life's blessings. The rich man **could have crossed** the chasm, but he chose to insulate himself against having to see Lazarus' need. The distance between them which **he had** determined in life, became fixed in death. The time for response was past and there was nothing that could now be done to establish a relationship between them. Too late.

It isn't that the rich man was harshly condemned or indicted because he was rich. It isn't that he persecuted Lazarus or deliberately

refused him food or sponsored legislation to rid his gates of beggars. No, it seems that the key is, that he never saw Lazarus. though he passed by him every day. His wealth had so distorted his vision that he was unable to perceive the plight of the beggar at his gate, to identify with his predicament, and ease his suffering. In shutting his eyes to human need, he had also shut out the God who is consistently portrayed in Scripture as a friend of the poor and a helper of the weak.

How easy it is for us to plan our lives in such a way that we never have to come face to face with the poor. We may read about the latest crime on the eastside or the increase in the homeless population or even walk quickly past the man begging on the street, or ignore her at the intersection, but we rarely- if ever- meet them, face to face.

Like the rich man, we are afraid to come too close to misery. We are especially afraid of the sight of poverty, for it is always a challenge to our style of life; it has a way of taking the gloss off our standard of living, making us re-examine our values. Why, look at how our city is now considering making pan-handling illegal. What do you think are the deep motivations for that development?

If we are ever to learn to be Lazarus' neighbor;
 if we are ever to get past our fear and avoidance of poverty, we must take the risk of putting faces on the needy. We must learn to see those who are in need on our own doorstep, or in our church courtyard every morning. It is not enough to send our check to charity - though that is part of what is needed. Sharing our resources – your special Micah 6 offering today- is a good first step, but it doesn't take the place of the next step: of face to face contact. It is only when we truly see Lazarus, the particular person in need at our gate, that a relationship can

be established between us. It is only when we look into one another's eyes that we can begin to see each other as human beings and neighbors.

>Did you listen to our youth back from their mission trip to Washington a few weeks ago? They were changed by what they experienced in getting to know personally the poor of that community.

>As Micah 6 volunteers provide for the needy homeless of this part of Austin, they are changed...they are opened and they see!

The amazing thing is that each time people really meet, face to face, the chasm of economics, education, race, language - whatever separates us - begins to collapse...and we discover that we are neighbors, human beings, who share in the blessings and burdens of life.

You and I may expect to see ourselves as the rich man in this parable. But thank God, we are not. We are not the rich man. We are his five brothers and sisters... still on earth. **Still with choices to make.** It is not too late for us to learn to see. It is not too late for us to choose a different way. We have Moses and the prophets **and Jesus** to show us what is required.

Lazarus is at our gate. What shall we do?