

An Invitation to Listen and to See
Luke 16:19-31
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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So, I'm curious how you feel about the rich man in today's parable.

It seems the easy thing is to vilify him...to tell ourselves he is bad...and in doing so to separate ourselves from him - after all, we're not rich, right? And we are *certainly* not bad.

But, as pastor and professor, Dr. Charles B. Cousar wrote, "The rich man is not pictured as inherently wicked. He does not persecute Lazarus, nor does he refuse him food, nor does he sponsor legislation to rid the gates of poor people like Lazarus." Dr. Cousar goes on writing, "As John Donahue points out, the problem is that all those days on earth the rich never 'see' the poor. 'One of the prime dangers of wealth is that it causes blindness'" (Charles B. Cousar, "Luke 16:19-31, Exegetical Perspective" in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 120-1).

And the quicker we dismiss the rich man in this parable, the quicker we become blind alongside him.

So, let's spend a little time exploring this together.

Here is Jesus. And our reading is from the Gospel of Luke. One of the things that Luke frequently does is to remind us about the dangers of money and possessions.

So, just a few verses before this parable we heard that familiar, and perhaps *not* so beloved verse that says, "You cannot serve God and wealth" (Luke 16:13b, NRSV). And just after that, we hear "the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed [Jesus]" (Luke 16:14, NRSV).

Today's parable comes shortly thereafter. And in this parable we meet two characters. These are people who have come in contact with each other in their daily life, though not as friends or colleagues, rather they have passed each other...they have known *of* each other but have not *known* each other. And we might say that they couldn't be more different, or at least they couldn't have more different experiences.

One, the unnamed rich man, has everything that money can buy. He has fine clothes and more than enough food. And, based on the way he talks of his brothers later in this parable, he has an extended family for which he cares deeply, and they are all used to having the finer things in life. The rich man has what we might call an easy life.

The second man, this one interestingly enough, given a name, is called Lazarus. Now let's not confuse him with the Lazarus known as Mary and Martha's brother, the Lazarus

who John tells us was raised from the dead. After all, again, let's remember this is a parable. So this particular Lazarus is one of a symbolic story, not one who we are supposed to assume we could get in a time machine and go back to meet. Perhaps we need to focus on the meaning of his name - Lazarus: God is my helper.

Anyway, this second person in the story lives a life much different than the first. Lazarus is poor. Lazarus is hungry. Lazarus is covered in sores. Lazarus' sores are so extensive that they have drawn the attention of the dogs in the streets and are therefore unlikely to heal. Lazarus has what we would certainly call a hard life.

But then the scene in the parable shifts. Now both men have died. And now their circumstances are different. It is Lazarus whose life has become easy and the rich man who is now struggling.

And, again, remember this is a parable. If we simply read it at face value, we might just read it as a promise of a heavenly reward or a warning of a nightmarish eternity. But because it is not meant to be read literally, what should we hear?

Perhaps rather than assuming that the pictures painted of how Lazarus and the rich man are faring in the afterlife are meant to be blueprints for heaven and hell, what if we hear them as naming the importance of how we live...how we live in relationship to the stuff we own and how we live in relationship to the people around us?

Because remember, Jesus was always encouraging people toward more faithful living, toward doing that which we claim when we pray the Lord's Prayer - working for the kingdom of God to come, not someday, somewhere out there in a place we call heaven, but to come right here in our midst.

And so, Jesus teaches us again and again how to help that happen. And if we are listening, we know that Jesus' answers are usually rooted in loving relationship.

Here Jesus invites us to see the people around us. And that isn't always easy.

After all, seeing them means to see their pain - which, friends, can be difficult. Because when we see their pain, we are asked to be present with them in it.

Seeing them means to see their humanity. Did you notice that even from the place of the dead, still the rich man in this parable is asking for Lazarus to serve him? Verse 24 reads, "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...'" (Luke 16:24, NRSV). As long as we see people only as commodities, only for what they can do for us or how much money we can make from them, then we are denying their humanity. But Jesus asks us to see them - all of the them, even the ones we don't like or are uncomfortable with - as human beings, as children of God.

And seeing the people around us sometimes means that we have to set down that which blocks our view. In the case of this parable it is the rich man's wealth, his comfort, the ease of his life. And, friends, more often than we like to admit, that is likely true for us.

The idea of "privilege" has been talked about a lot in recent years. And some of us have had to learn to see ours. Some of us still push back on the idea. But I am often reminded of the definition I heard that resonated with me...privilege is having the luxury not to do anything about a situation.

So, yes, we need to learn to set down many things...our privilege, our busyness, our self-centeredness, our security, our wealth...all of the things that get in the way of our seeing others around us...all of the things that we rely on that intentionally or unintentionally replace living lives of love.

Friends, the reality is that being people of faith is difficult. Following Jesus is difficult. Because it asks something of us. And we don't want to admit that there are times when we might prefer to choose not to listen to Jesus, not to listen to the prophets, not to listen to the heart of God.

But as Professor Audrey West wrote, "The Torah commands care for the poor, love for both neighbor and stranger, and the provision of food for the needy. The prophets warn of consequences for our failure to do justice for each of these. God keeps sending the message that there is a better way. But when we have more than enough, it is easy to become distracted from the things of God. Jesus aims this parable at everyone who knows they will still have food next week and a safe place to sleep night after night" (Audrey West "September 25, 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time" in *Christian Century*, September 2022).

I was in a conversation recently where someone said that she realized that proclaiming that God loves her also requires her to insist that God loves everybody. And if God loves everybody, that probably requires a lot from us as followers of Jesus.

This is our invitation...to listen to Jesus and then to follow him. When we do, then we will find that we see others more clearly and that in seeing them we learn to love them.

And, if this seems overwhelming, you are in good company. So remember, our lives are a work in progress. I feel certain I will not get it all right this week. If you do, I celebrate with you.

But more important than doing it all right today or tomorrow is our commitment to continue to do the work...our willingness to be uncomfortable...our acknowledgement that our faith may rework our priorities and cause us to challenge our assumptions.

This is the work to which we are called. It is work of listening and of seeing and of making more whole the family of God. Because remember, in the parable, even the rich man in his agony was called, "Child."

Gratefully, we too, are still called God's own. So, let us go with God and each other, willing to grow and change, as we become the people God calls us to be. Amen.