

September 25, 2022
Lectionary 26, Year C
The 16th Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 16:19-31
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Seeing Lazarus

We're not supposed to like the rich man in our gospel reading for today, and I suspect that most of us don't. We can't imagine how he could have been so cruel, so heartless, as he walked by Lazarus, poor, suffering Lazarus at his gate, and gave him nothing, not his time, not his attention, not a crust of his bread, to help alleviate his suffering. We're not supposed to like this rich guy, who climbed over Lazarus on his way to having whatever he wanted.

But I also think that if he lived today, if we knew him, if we read about him online or heard about him from our friends or if he invited us to one of his parties, I think that we might be a little bit impressed by him; maybe even be a little bit jealous of him, for all that he has, for his easy abundance, for his seemingly careless wealth. We might wonder how he got what he had, and what we could do to be like him. I think that we might look up to him, just a little.

I think we might even sympathize with him. After all, nobody wants a beggar living in their driveway.

In our culture, we tend to look up to the rich, to the important, to those who are able to attend and throw the best parties. That's why those are the people who are featured in the magazines at check-out lines. Those are the people that most people want to read about.

Besides, we could tell ourselves, this guy, the rich man in our story for today, was a family man. He cared about his brothers, all five of them, he wasn't just all about himself.

And we can't really blame him for ignoring Lazarus. Who doesn't want to ignore Lazarus? Who doesn't want to pretend that the Lazaruses of the world don't exist? Lazarus's misery was off-putting. Lazarus's problems were complicated. Lazarus could make you feel badly about yourself, just by looking at him, such a contrast he posed between the lifestyle that sometimes we wish we all had, carefree, anything we want ours for the taking, and the brutal suffering and the desperate need of most of the world.

Clearly it wasn't just the rich man who wanted to avoid Lazarus. No one wanted to be around him. He was left alone, at the rich man's gate, passed by day after day after day, hungry and wretched, with only the dogs to lick his sores. And, lest we romanticize, the idea of the faithful dog giving Lazarus comfort and companionship, we need to know that in ancient Israeli culture his contact with a dog would have been another strike against him, because in that culture, having contact with a dog made you unclean. Lazarus was not, and, if we're honest with ourselves, is not likeable.

So, it's not so hard to imagine what might have been going through the rich man's head when he walked by Lazarus every day, what he might have told himself to justify looking away from Lazarus's desperate need. "What a nuisance...who left this beggar here...why is he cluttering up my street, with his filth and his stench...maybe he's just faking it to get a hand-out."

And maybe, after a while, when it was clear that Lazarus wasn't going away, the rich man just stopped seeing him at all. Selective blindness. Beggar at the gate? What beggar at the gate?

And day, by day, by day, as he stepped over Lazarus, as he looked the other way, as he pretended that he didn't see him, the chasm between Lazarus and rich man grew, and grew, and grew. A hole dug by fear and indifference and neglect, a hole that grew so deep, that there was no way for the Lazarus to reach the rich man, and no way for the rich man to reach Lazarus.

And according to our gospel reading, when both the Lazarus and the rich man died, the chasm that had been shaped in life, by the rich man's attitude toward the suffering of the beggar at his gate, was still there. And there was still no way for the rich man to reach Lazarus and no way for Lazarus to reach the rich man.

But in death, in life after death, it is the rich man who wants Lazarus's attention. And amazingly enough, he wants Lazarus's help. He expects Lazarus to come and comfort him in his torments.

He asks very little, but he doesn't ask it of Lazarus. He asks Father Abraham, who has Lazarus, safe, healed, and comforted, in his arms to send Lazarus to dip his finger in cool water and place it on his tongue, to help him endure the flames of Hades.

If it is possible, the chasm grew wider, just with that request. Even in his own need, even when he was the desperate one, the rich man couldn't bring himself to speak to the beggar that, day after day, he had ignored. Maybe, remembering what Lazarus had been, he still found him to be beneath his notice, unless Lazarus could do something for him. Maybe, and we can hope that this was the case, he was too ashamed by how he had treated Lazarus in life, to ask him for his help in death.

Whichever it was, Lazarus was spared the trouble of answering. After all, the question hadn't been asked of him anyway.

Abraham answered and told the rich man that it was too late. Lazarus had suffered in life and was comforted in death. The rich man had had more than he needed for several lifetimes and enjoyed it to the fullest and now he suffered in death. And there was this chasm....

The rich man made one more attempt. And this attempt shows that while he might seem to be the most selfish of men, he was capable of thinking about someone besides himself, because in the midst of his own suffering, he remembered his brothers. Five brothers, who needed to know what awaited them if their lifestyles didn't change. If they didn't see the beggar at the gate.

Once again, he hoped that Lazarus would do him this one small service. Leave the bosom of Abraham and go to warn the brothers of the man who had stepped over him on his way to his daily parties.

And once again, Lazarus was spared the trouble of answering. Abraham reminded the rich man that he and his brothers had been warned. They had been told what to do, in the law of Moses and in the prophets. They had been told that the God of Israel had mercy on the poor, watched over the widow, the orphan, and the displaced. They had been told that the people of God were to be people who sustained the needy in their midst. Those who had much were told that they were to share with those who had little. This was part of what it meant to be part of the people of God; part of the family of God.

And this was what the rich man missed, in all of his long, richly indulged life. He missed the fact that he had more than five brothers. He missed the fact that, in the eyes of God, Lazarus was his brother too.

We live at a time when we are told, and when we can see, that the gap between the rich and the world's global poor is widening. It's a great chasm,

created by economic structures that favor the rich, created by climate disasters that disproportionately affect people who live in the poorest communities and the poorest countries. It's a great chasm created by attitudes of scarcity. Fear that we're going to run out, fear that we might not have enough for our own needs, or for a rainy day, or for our own families, fear of being duped by the dishonest who would take advantage of people's generosity.

And day, by day, by day, the chasm grows. And we, too have been warned, in the law and the prophets, that the great chasm will bring destruction, "Woe," and "Alas."

But we also have Jesus Christ, who did not come with rules and laws, with threats and warnings, with finger wagging, but who, while he lived on earth, loved the outcast, and touched the unclean, and said, "Blessed are poor."

We have Jesus Christ, who has come back from the dead, so that we may believe, and so that, by the power of his living, resurrected presence, we can be loved into a new family.

Jesus came back from the dead, and reaches his nail pierced hands across the great chasms created by fear, by indifference, by the webs of sin that we find ourselves ensnared in, so that we can be healed, so that our ears can be opened, to hear the cry of the poor, so that we can be given new eyes, to see in each other and in those who are suffering, our brothers, our sisters, the beloved of God, those we are called to love. Jesus comes to heal us, so that we can see the beggar at the gate, so that we can see Lazarus. Amen.