

“Hindsight is 20-20”
in the “More Than Meets the Eye” Worship Series
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Fourth Sunday in Lent
Edina Morningside Community Church; March 26, 2017

Luke 16:19-31

“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.’”

Last Sunday after worship I sat downstairs in Fellowship Hall, meeting with the Capital Campaign Executive Committee. From the other side of the room, Pam DeLaitre came over and spoke in my ear. “We have twenty-two beds!” she told me with awe. She was referring to our Lenten fundraiser for the Daylight School in Kenya, where \$40 provides one new set of bedding for students at the residential program. But: “Twenty-two??” I asked. “We had only three at the start of worship!” Pam confirmed twenty-two, and my mouth fell open. I started bouncing up and down in my seat at the breathtaking compassion in our church community. This is even more remarkable because it was not one large check (as I assumed), but *many* faithful and loving gifts to support the students of Daylight. Church, my heart swells with gratitude every time I see your selfless generosity. Sometimes it’s financial, as in your weekly and monthly pledge support or examples of special support for ministries like Daylight. Other times it’s in your time and talents, as when the Green, Williams and Engelke families donated many hours this week to dusting, cleaning and resetting the library and third-floor spaces after construction. At all times, it’s humbling and inspiring to serve in this generous congregation. Sincerely, thank you.

How strange, then, to hear today’s parable about a complete *absence* of generosity. One indicator after another emphasizes the wealth of this unnamed rich man. He dresses in fine linen and the royal color purple, he feasts—sumptuously—every day. By contrast, Lazarus shows every sign of destitute poverty. He lies at the rich man’s gate (unable even to stand), covered in sores and hungry, but with not even table scraps to eat. The rich man encounters Lazarus daily, or at least often enough to know his name, yet does nothing to alleviate the poor man’s suffering. Both die, then Jesus describes how the situation reverses after death: Lazarus receives the consolation of Abraham’s embrace, while the rich man suffers without even a drop of water. Between the two is a vast divide, a “great chasm” such that nobody can pass from one “far away” side to the other. Social inequality in life has become eternal separation in death.

There is no happy ending or reconciliation in this story. Barbara Rossing writes that Jesus’ parable functions like an “apocalypse”, one of the end-times, ultimate-judgment visions which show up in the Bible. [She says](#), “An apocalypse serves as a wake-up call, pulling back a curtain to open our eyes to

something we urgently need to see before it is too late. ...[It is] a warning, like the dream sequences of Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*." The warning of Jesus' parable is unmistakable here. [Daniel Clendenin summarizes its meaning](#): "[O]ur time is short. Our opportunities to serve the poor don't last forever. Our economic choices shape our deepest identities and our eternal destinies."

I hear Jesus' parable, and I am not comforted by it. How many times have I answered "no" when someone calls the church asking if we have money for their rent, groceries, car repairs, or other needs? Perhaps we remember all the times we've passed by someone asking for help on the sidewalk or holding a cardboard sign at the exit of the freeway. We understand the complexities of giving money to those who beg, and how hard it is to meet basic needs without encouraging dependency. But the great chasm of income inequality between rich and poor looms before us, especially since it is now at its widest point in almost a century. The vast numbers of poor people in our country boggle the mind. [Pastor Mary Austin relays these findings](#) from the hunger organization Feeding America: "In 2015, 42.2 million people lived in "food insecure" households, meaning they could not count on regular access to enough nutritious food. Children are especially hard hit, with 14.5 million (19.7 percent) children under the age of 18 living in poverty." The gap between rich and poor becomes even more vast when considering the rest of our neighbors around the world. I recently learned that in terms of global wealth I am part of the top *one percent*, as is anyone else who earns more than [\\$32,400 per year](#). Congratulations—and *whoa*. With great privilege comes great responsibility.

None of us choose what family to be born into, and even the talents by which we make our livings come from beyond ourselves. That's why the simple fact of wealth—or lack thereof—is no proof of virtue or vice. What matters is not the money, but how people with means use those resources. Most fundamentally, do we actually *see* the poor, allow ourselves to be moved by suffering, and recognize the common bonds of humanity that call for responsible action? "The rich man's sin was not that he was rich," [Alyce McKenzie writes](#), "but that, during his earthly life, he did not 'see' Lazarus, despite his daily presence at the entrance to his home." [Another commentator concludes](#) that "The rich man's wealth has so distorted his vision that he is unable to perceive the plight of the beggar at his gate, to identify with his predicament, and to ease his suffering." What about us? Do we see Lazarus at the gate—someone who is poor, immigrant, or a hungry child? If we do see, how do we respond?

Two quick stories. Last weekend, Javen and I were on the Green Line train returning home from a concert. It was late on Saturday night, and both of us looked forward to bed before an early Sunday morning. On the fifteen-minute train ride, our conversation was periodically interrupted by loud, profane outbursts coming from a man hunched a few seats away. He wasn't talking to anyone except the voices in his head, but his words had the whole train on edge. It turns out he was getting off at the same stop we were, and when the doors opened we stood behind him waiting to step off the train. However, due to his confusion, our slowness, and the congestion of other passengers, the doors closed again before we could leave the train. Forced to ride on to the next stop before we could turn around, I found myself unreasonably angry with this man. What most angered me was the extra five minutes it took to get home, and not the fact that he had clear and unmet mental illness needs. I saw him not as a God-beloved person in need of kind connection, but only as an obstacle to my comfort. How easy it is to pass by Lazarus at the gate.

Brian Sirchio is a singer-songwriter and UCC minister in Wisconsin, with a different response. He has a decades-long connection to the country of Haiti, traveling there several times a year. One of his songs describes being in a taxi at night, stuck in heavy traffic. A child beggar approaches the car upon seeing his white skin, and he tries to look away. But then he remembers Mother Theresa's words that street children are Christ in disguise, so he looks deep into her eyes and makes human connection. [The chorus of his song](#) goes: *I see you. I see you. / Hey little girl, I won't pretend that you're not there / I see you. I see you. / Little girl Christ, I see you.*

There is more than meets the eye in situations of dire need. Yes, they call us to consider the great chasms between rich and poor. They reveal—if we let ourselves see—the systemic root causes that perpetuate poverty. They clamor for responses of compassion and justice. But before any of these, the presence of any “Lazarus at the gate” asks us to see below the conditions of life to a shared human identity as beings beloved by God and created for good. We cannot counteract the grievances of the world if we let ourselves stay disconnected from those who personally suffer such hardships. Do we truly see Lazarus, and if so how does that change our response?

The rich man had the benefit of 20/20 hindsight, but it was only after he died that he learned the importance of seeing those who suffer. Today, we are called to exercise not hindsight but faith-sight. We are in the place of the man’s brothers who are still alive, called to learn from Moses, the prophets, and Jesus himself. A message HAS come from the other side of the grave—perhaps we hear a warning that those who have much must do more to share and help; perhaps also we hear the promise to the poor that they will be comforted. The greatest message and messenger today is Jesus himself, who would pull off the blinders that keep us focused primarily on possessions, turn our hearts and our eyes to see the image of God in each person, then empower us to act differently because of it. Christian generosity arises [not through guilt or duty but through love](#), “by seeing one another as we really are—broken, beautiful, and created in God’s image—and affirming the wealth that comes though that alone.” By God’s grace in light of all this, we will recognize ourselves as recipients of divine generosity, then called to be comforters of the poor and repairers of the great chasms among us. In the words of the Hopi elder, “This is the hour...and we are the ones we’ve been waiting for.”

So how will we respond this week, when the beloved of God come near, and we’re called upon to manifest the kingdom of God? “Start Close In”, David Whyte says in his poem by the same name. To help us this week, each person is welcome to receive a dollar bill as you go out from church into the world. Our ushers have them in the back as you depart, and there are some here for those who use the elevator. Each bill has an invitation attached: “Please use this dollar bill to show kindness and build God’s Beloved Community this week. If you choose, let us know how this has helped you see and serve God in another person.” You will know best how to use it—perhaps as a token of care for someone you know, or someone you don’t know. Of course, one dollar will not make a world of difference by itself. The real point of this is to spark us into truly seeing one another, and to practice the kind of generosity worthy of Christ. I look forward to hearing how God uses a simple dollar bill as a drop of care for the poor and vulnerable in Jesus name.

After all, we trust that the great chasms and barriers between us are not permanent. “This is a parable, not a prediction,” [as preacher David Lose says](#), so “we have the power to rewrite the ending. ...we are those who have seen a man raised from the dead and that in his name we are both able and committed to sharing water, love, and good news with all those in need.”

Let us pray (using words from the hymn “You Satisfy the Hungry Heart”): *“You give yourself to us, O Lord; then selfless let us be, to serve each other in your name in truth and charity.” Amen.*