

Sermon ✝ September 25, 2022

Luke 16:19-31

Frank Maxwell

Although it happened some thirty years ago, I remember this incident as if it were yesterday.

We were living in Madison and I was on my way to a local strip mall to pick up a few groceries. As I turned into the parking lot, I noticed a young woman standing near the main driveway. She appeared to be in her early twenties. Her clothes were dirty and her general appearance was disheveled. She was holding a cardboard sign which read, "*Will work for food.*"

Often times, when I see a person in such a situation, my mind is immediately flooded with all kinds of questions, "*How is it that she has come to this moment in her life?*" . . . "*What about her family?*" . . . "*Where is she from?*" . . . "*I wonder if she has any children . . . any hungry children?*" . . . "*Where does she sleep at night?*"

All of these questions ran quickly through my mind as I turned into the parking lot and wondered about the young woman who was publicly advertising her willingness to work . . . and her need for food.

Knowing nothing about her, I could only assume that desperation . . . and an empty stomach had brought her to that moment.

And just as I completed my turn into the parking lot, I also observed a man coming toward the woman. He, too, was young but dressed in a well-tailored, blue suit. It looked expensive. (Curious about the unfolding drama, I released my foot from the gas pedal and proceeded ever so slowly toward the parking lot).

The young man in the blue suit motioned to the young girl in the dirty clothes. As he briefly spoke with her, he motioned for her to leave the parking lot ... to take herself *and her sign* somewhere else.

As I continued into the parking lot, I wondered about the young man in the expensive looking blue suit. More questions enter my head, "*I wonder where he works?*" . . . "*Does he see the young girl's vigil at the front gate of the strip mall as being bad for business?*" or "*Does her presence make him uncomfortable as it forces him to think about some life issues that he would rather not deal with?*" . . . "*I wonder, does he even have the authority to ask her to move?*" . . . "*I wonder, will he even care if she goes to bed hungry on this night?*"

By now, I am in the parking lot. I purchase my groceries confident that there is enough money in my checking account to pay the bill. I don't even think twice about it. As I leave the parking lot, the young girl has moved on. The young man in the blue suit has probably returned to his comfortable office. I wonder . . . will he think anymore this day about the

young girl with the dirty clothes and the cardboard sign. It's been thirty years . . . and I still wonder about her.

*"There was once a rich man who dressed in the most expensive clothes and lived in great luxury everyday."* This is how Jesus begins his parable about the rich man and Lazarus.

This is a parable that has to do with human need; it has to do with whether persons are aware or not . . . compassionate or not. This is a parable that confronts the meaning of life in the present.

I find it interesting that most people who read this parable are individuals with sufficient food, adequate shelter, and reasonably good health, who, nonetheless, tend to identify with poor Lazarus. But Jesus says, *"Not so. We can't get by with that."*

This is one of those incredibly uncomfortable stories that, if we are willing, would have us take a look in the mirror of our life where we may encounter a person that we don't really want to know.

This is a story about the worth of persons . . . each and every person. This parable stresses the importance of awareness. The rich man's sin was not that he was rich but that he did not see, not really.

In the first chapter of Ephesians, buried in the midst of a sentence that is no less than 224 words in length, is a most significant phrase: The writer speaks of *having the eyes of your heart enlightened*. It is a profound statement and it speaks to our need for awareness . . . our need for compassion.

The rich man's problem was what he did not do. He ignored Lazarus, because he did not see him, at least not with the eyes of his heart.

He was unaware of Lazarus' existence as a person with feelings as well as physical needs. No doubt, he dispensed his small tidbits of charity . . . but he felt no compassion.

An old New Englander once told William James, *"There ain't much difference between one man and another, but what little difference there is ... is awfully important."* My experience with people verifies that . . . especially when that difference is an awareness of and compassion for another person. Think about how you feel when you know that another person is aware of you . . . when they find out that you are in the hospital and visit or send you a card.

The rich man's sin was that he had no compassion for Lazarus. To be a compassionate person means that you see all persons as being equal. And let's be honest here . . . we have a real hard time with this. Remember the old confession faith, *"We are by nature sinful and unclean ..."*

It is so easy for us to think of ourselves as being somehow better than those who have less than we do. For most of us, *luck* has a lot to do with where we are in life.

It is an accident of birth that I was born a white male into a middle-class family in Kenosha, Wisconsin. The very instant that I was pulled from my mother's womb I already had a head start on 95% of the population of the world. I went to the head of the line.

Because I was *lucky* enough to be born into my family, I experienced loving, caring, educated parents. I had the advantage of good schools. I've had the opportunity to visit most of the United States, much of Canada and even a few European countries.

Oh sure, I have studied hard and worked hard, as did my parents before me. But the game of life is played on an uneven field . . . and some of us get more breaks than others. I am not better than the young girl with the dirty clothes and cardboard sign, but I am luckier.

This parable forces its way into the comfortable routine of my life and your life. It serves to remind us that we have been created as equal . . . this is God's intention.

But, the curse of humanity is that we do not share or embrace God's vision for us. Poverty, racism, war, hunger . . . these are the by-products of greed, envy, jealousy and hatred.

And God, through Christ, is saying to us, *“Hey guys, you better wake up and smell the coffee. Time is running out here.”*

The point of this parable is simple: Don't you ever dare to think of yourself as being better than another person. Also be aware of all people, especially those who haven't been quite so lucky.

And where there is awareness, compassion will follow. . . and you and I will never again be quite the same.

That's how it is with our God . . . that's how God would have us live.

In the name of this same God, we gather and pray, Amen.

*“When we let our compassion go, we lose whatever claim we have to the Divine.”*

~ Bruce Springstein