

Sermon : “I Didn’t See Him”

Scripture: 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 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’.”

THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD.

As parables of Jesus go, this has to be one of the least familiar. It flows from prior dialogue between Jesus and the Pharisees about the love of money and the search for riches, and true riches. This parable is not difficult to understand, but perhaps difficult to hear, because its meaning is clear: riches cannot save you. The parable ends with a deafening silence.

The parable begins in a familiar formula of its time, borrowed from what scholars’ think is an Egyptian tale. Two worlds within two worlds are clearly set up. The parable first describes two physical worlds: the earthly life and the life beyond this one. These worlds are connected by the experience of death. Curiously woven within each of these are two other worlds: the world of the haves and that of the have-nots, the world of the rich and that of the poor, the world of the comforted and that of the afflicted. This parable is set up with clearly defined boundaries between worlds, and one must wonder if ever the twain shall meet. The rich man dresses in purple and fine linen clothes, which signifies that he likely comes from royalty. That he lives in a “gated” community indicates social barriers as well. Despite all this, though, the rich man is not depicted as an evil person; he simply does not **see** the man at his gate, though he himself eats “sumptuously every day”. The poor man, on the other hand, apparently comes to the gate regularly, desiring to be fed scrapes of this sumptuous food that the rich man ate. He is characterized as a man who is abjectly poor, with sores that the dogs came to lick, no doubt leaving him degraded and also open to infections and slow, if not impossible, healing.

The contrasts and disparities between the rich and the poor so vividly described here are meant to evoke an equally vivid reaction to “Lovers of money”, so it was a direct message to them. Apparently, Jesus wanted to reveal through this story that they loved money more than people, their possessions more than the poor, their clothes more than compassion, and their extravagant feast more than sharing food with the hungry. Robert Frost’s poem “Mending Wall” wrestles with the irony of neighbors who long to have clear boundaries on their neighborliness. Frost wonders aloud why it is that we divide ourselves. “On a day we meet to walk the line and set the wall between us once again.” There is something about us that likes those clearly defined boundaries of what’s my place and what’s yours. In this parable there is little interaction between the two men. The rich man is not disdainful of Lazarus; he simply does not notice him. What we know about Lazarus is his name and his need. His empty stomach and life are gnawing at him, and his gaze is set on the household of the rich man, where he hopes only for the leftovers – or less, the crumbs. He gets nothing. The only ones who notice him are the dogs, who, in a grotesque show of how low a human life can go, lick the oozing wounds of the poor man.

Then both men die, though we may notice that only the rich man is buried. Angels carry off the poor man to Abraham's bosom, whereas the rich man dies and ends up in Hades, the abode of the dead, "The pit of torment shall appear, and opposite it shall be the place of rest;

and the furnace of hell shall be disclosed, and opposite it the paradise of delight." There the rich man observes Abraham and Lazarus together. He calls out to Father Abraham to have mercy on him and to send Lazarus, still thought of as a servant, with water to cool his thirst. Abraham reminds the rich man that during his lifetime he enjoyed the good things of life and Lazarus had nothing. Furthermore, there is a great gap between where Abraham and Lazarus are and where the rich man is, "and no one can cross from there to us" (v26).

The one who was afflicted is now comforted, and the one who lived comfortably is now in agony. The division now is more physical than relational; there is a great, impassable chasm between them. On the one side is Lazarus in the arms of Abraham, nestled as a child nestles at the bosom of its mother: fed, safe, warm. Lazarus has never had this experience before. On the other side of the chasm is the rich man, who this time is being tormented in the low place, left to gaze hungrily. Now the man shows the first compassion we have seen, but it is still deceptively mixed with manipulation.

The rich man then remembers his five brothers who are still alive and begs Abraham to send someone to warn them, lest they end up in the same predicament as he is in. Abraham says, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them." "No Father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent" (v29-30). With this obvious allusion to Jesus' resurrection, father Abraham responds that they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.

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. 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".

In modern times Lazarus corresponds to the person who begs, but one dare not look into his or her eyes, lest a claim is made upon one's compassion. It is acceptable to give aid to the worthy poor, but it also socially permissible to regard some as not worthy. Perhaps the boundaries and walls we have drawn are not so much between us and others as between us and God.

Frost winds down his poem with these thoughts, "Before I build a wall, I'd ask to know what I was walling in or walling out."

Perhaps the reader, preacher, and congregation will find it hard to identify with either the rich man with all his wealth or the poor man with devastation. They both represent people other than us; but perhaps we can identify with the five brothers, those who can be instructed by Moses and the prophets and can come actually to "see" the beggar at our gates. The parable then becomes a word for those left behind to "warn them so that they will not also come into this place of torment" (v28). Inherent in Luke's gospel is the word of reversal that the first become last and the last become first. (Luke 13:30). Throughout Luke's gospel, we read of the God who "has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty" (1:53). The parable powerfully calls into question how we handle our money today and raises the question of whether we "see" the poor at our gates.

PRAYER:

We pray to you, O God; be our helper and protector. Save the afflicted, have mercy on the lowly, raise up the fallen, help the needy, humble the proud, return the lost, feed the hungry, release the captive, heal the sick, revive the weak, and comfort those in fear. All this we ask for the sake of the world you love, and in the name of the one you sent to save us; Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.

BENEDICTION:

The moral of the story expressed in this parable is that if you do not cross the gaping chasm between the rich and the poor in this life, you surely will not be able to do it in the next. In the final day, this chasm cannot be crossed. GO IN PEACE.