

Luke 16.19-31

Open our eyes that we may see

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You know the warning labels on medicines that you are supposed to read before you take them? Here is the warning that should be posted on every Bible: Reading the Bible may disturb your sleep, affect your behavior in peculiar though unpredictable ways and overtime this will cause you to change your life. Be careful.

The reading from Luke's gospel of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus is a case in point. You have been warned.

Read Luke 16.19-31

Some of you may recall the film Avatar. It's a parable of life set in an imaginary world created by the director. In this imaginary world, the native people greet one another by saying, "I see you." *I see you* is the greeting that acknowledges the other. It's a signal that you are fully present to the other; not rushing by, not distracted by your own inner voices or devices. The director of Avatar is asking us to imagine a world where people see one another; are actually present to each other.

I think the failure to see the Other is the moral failure at the heart of Luke's tale of the rich man and Lazarus.

Only after the rich man died and felt the consequences of his lifestyle – one of ignoring the prophets' summons to care for the poor and the hungry and Moses' call to love God and neighbor – did he want to make a change in his living. Too late, comes the verdict. That seems a bit harsh until we admit that the point is obvious: once you are dead, you are done. You can't help others get what you didn't.

But, the parable suggests that it's not too late for the living. This is the good news! It's not too late for you and me, either. After all, who are the five living brothers whom the rich man wanted to warn?

Karl Barth once said Christians best discern the will of God by reading the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. In this conversation, Barth believed

one can slowly but surely discern the will of God for our lives. Following that practice, I note the desperately poor Lazarus, ill clothed with open sores, at the gated home of the rich man, finally dressed and living with sumptuously. One of them, scripture tells us, received terrible things his entire life while the other received only good things. Not only were they separated by a gate, they were separated by goods, resources and food. One had none; the other had everything.

On the other hand, I read the news from the Christian Science Monitor that Global poverty has fallen faster during the past 20 years than at any time in history. Around the world hunger, child death, and disease rates have all plummeted. More girls are getting into school. In fact, never before have so many people, in so many poor countries, made so much progress in reducing poverty, increasing incomes, improving health, reducing conflict and war, and spreading democracy.

In 2016, the ranks of the desperately poor have shrunk to under 10 percent of the population, compared with 42 percent. These are the dirt poor – people who live on less than a \$1.90 a day. The hollow-eyed and hungry ones are still among us.

And so my mind shifts back to the Bible where Lazarus is lying at the gate with open sores, receiving only terrible things his entire life. He is a haunting presence, yet he appears to be invisible to the rich man who received only good things. What will it take for us to see?

David Beckman, the President of Bread for the World, says, “We recognize God’s continuing presence in the progress being made against hunger and poverty. We should thank God as mothers all over the world do. When these women can’t feed their babies, they pray. If they are able to work their way out of hunger so that their children can eat and even go to school, many of these mothers remember to thank God. Those of us who see the scale of progress worldwide should do the same.” Yet, a single child, disparately poor is holy and valued in the eyes of God. Can we see with the eyes of the heart?

Lazarus and the rich man both die. This is the cold fact that shifts the biblical story into a moral tale designed to help the living wake up. One might title this section: what you need to know and do before you die.

Lazarus, desperately hungry and dependent upon the kindness of the wealthy, has no lifestyle choices. In the end he is raised from the dead to enjoy the consolations of heaven. The rich man, who presumably had every choice and the power to shape his lifestyle in whatever way he wanted, is sent to suffer the torments of hell. Only then, does he begin to re-assess his "lifestyle". It's too late.

This is not a parable for those who think how we live now has no real consequences. Nor do we need to get distracted by discussions about hell. Isn't it enough to say that real or metaphorical, the point is simple: hell is a not where you want to be?

Is this the Jesus' gospel invitation nestled within the disturbance: ***live wisely now, with open eyes and an open heart to the suffering of those around us?***

I find it unsettling that the rich man appears to be living a successful life not unlike any other modestly wealthy person in our time, which would include the majority of Christians in North America. I couldn't help but think of the story last week of the new luxury hotel opening in the old DC post-office where guests paid \$800 a night. I wondered how many of those guests had to step around the homeless men and women on the nearby streets? Did they see them at all?

Of course, we are not likely to be in that hotel, or ever pay that kind of money for a sleepover; but who are we missing someone? Who is invisible to you? Can you say "I see you" to your neighbor? It reminds of what Yogi Berra famously said, "you can observe a lot by watching."

Nothing indicates that the Rich Man mistreated or abused Lazarus. He simply arranges his life in such a way that the afflicted and the hungry are rendered invisible. The blind, the lame, the dirty and disheveled poor are outside his field of vision: always there; but always invisible. And since we are all disturbed by the killings in Tulsa and Charlotte, and want it all to stop; I am compelled to say Black Lives matter, of course they do. We know that AND we know that all lives bear the image of God that we are called to see – truly see – and honor.

I hear the tale of the Rich Man and Lazarus as a wake up to the real consequences of our life choices now. One day I will die, as we all will. That's a fact. And this within this fact is actually the gospel invitation: to live wisely now.

So I ask myself: Lord, who am I not seeing? And I pray: open my eyes that I may see.

Will you pray with me: Lord, open my eyes that I may see.

In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.