

Proper 21 C
St. Luke 16:19-31
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St. George's Bolton
Fr. Chris

Hidden Poverty

"There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores."

The epitome of misery. The historical symbol of dire poverty. The nexus of abandonment. Can anyone be more unlovable? Imagine, if you will, the stench emitting from this man with his festering sores!

And so he sat in the gate of the rich man's property, day after day, unnoticed, part of the wallpaper of life. The homes of the wealthy were compounds constructed around a courtyard, the entrance to which may have been where this man, Lazarus sat.

He was waiting to be noticed. He was waiting for some scrap of food from the table of Dives, a table of bounty and luxury, which most folks could not imagine, a variety of fruits, nuts, breads and meats, along with fine wine for a libation. He was hoping that that which was not consumed, which was considered waste, or which was undesirable due to some blemish might be passed along his way. He looked for some scraps, morsels of food, however, the dogs would lap them up, or these scraps would be thrown to other animals if the rich man kept them.

What a pathetic sight! Or maybe not as pathetic as it sounds, because we can garner from the story that the rich man and members of his household, even his servants, did not notice Lazarus sitting in the gate and begging. Did he not ask for help each day, or was his voice so weak that it could not be heard? He was not so much a pathetic sight, because he became invisible, part of the background of life, fading quickly from grey to the blackness of night and disappearing in the mist. Lazarus was an invisible, unseen, untouchable man.

And so it was that Lazarus was relieved of his sufferings through mortal death, which likely went unnoticed as his remains were swept up and discarded like so much of the unwanted detritus in the streets. Yet God had not forgotten this humble man of so much suffering. The hopeful and good news is that God provided comfort for this soul, the likes of which he could not have imagined on earth. Lazarus is seen by Dives as he burns in the fires of hell far below, as Lazarus is now keeping company with the great Patriarch of Israel, Abraham himself. As the story went on, Abraham speaks to Dives, who begs him to send Dives to fetch a cup of cold water to relieve his own suffering:

“Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.”

Now Dives sees Lazarus, but it is too late. And Lazarus is now unable to see Dives, or worry about his plight.

The tale is a cautionary one, *that we should not go on through life with blinders on*. We should not avoid gazing upon the ugly, the unwanted, and the other cast-offs of society. We need to open our eyes and see them. In these persons we are given the opportunity to see and serve the living Christ. It is the most basic, urgent desire of God. Remember the plea of Matthew chapter 25, *"As you did it to the least of these, you did it unto to me."* Indeed Lord, have we seen you hungry, or sick, or naked, or in prison, and have we reached out to you? Mother Teresa said, *"When I pick up a hungry person from the street, I give him a plate of rice, a piece of bread. But a person who is shut out, who feels unwanted, unloved, terrified, the person who has been thrown out of society—that spiritual poverty is much harder to overcome."*

There is much poverty in the world. The middle class in our society are gradually joining the ranks of the impoverished, along with the retired folks on fixed incomes.

Dives may have been rich in material things, but he was impoverished spiritually. Which do you suppose is worse? To live in the lap of luxury, ignoring those less fortunate around you when you have the ability to help? All he had to do was notice Lazarus, and share a few scraps of food, or a cup of cold water. What would it have cost him to bring relief to this suffering soul? But he ignored him. He was very likely bothered by him, by his presence at his gate, a reminder that not all in the world was as rosy as he experienced it. He saw no opportunity to help or be generous, to share what he was given so generously by God, and which he could easily have shared with Lazarus. Instead, the wasted food was either tossed to the animals or the dung heap.

Being impoverished in spirit leaves one cold and dead inside, worse off than the unloved and abandoned on the streets, because the spiritually impoverished are not able to love and experience love. The only love they can feel is for themselves. Being unable to see human suffering or notice the needs of others around you, ranks you as lacking human empathy, and that places you close to the sad sociopaths who roam the world in their own darkness, of either self love or loathing, seeking not to serve others, but to use them for their own purposes. Dives surely was teetering on the edge of this as he pranced about in his purple finery.

It is not popular to argue for the case of caring for the less fortunate these days. It is labeled as soft-hearted liberalism. I am willing to be labeled a liberal, but please understand it as I do: I am called to live and give liberally out of love. I am called to love liberally, without limit.

Mother Teresa also said... *"Today it is very fashionable to talk about the poor. Unfortunately, it is not fashionable to talk with them."*

It is one thing to give generously of the things which are needed to those who need them. It is quite another to give of yourself, to share yourself, to risk seeing that there, but for the Grace of God, go I. It is in touching the humanity of another, being a friend to the friendless and the lonely, acknowledging the one who is so embarrassed to ask for help and making them feel equal to you, that they have something to give to you.

The beginning of this I see in our bi-weekly pantry. But I also see it as I go about each day. And I am as challenged by it as you are.

I just hope I have the strength to keep my eyes open so that I
can see Jesus when he presents himself to me. AMEN