

Luke 16:19-31

Jesus said, "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.'"

I hope you all had a great week. We had some great activities at Redeemer this past week. Ultreya was here at Redeemer on Thursday night. Frances came back for it and some other things. We continued to make great progress for the pumpkin patch that is going to begin in just a couple of weeks. It will raise support for three very important ministries as well as give the opportunity for 7 congregations from 6 denominations the chance to engage more deeply God's mission together. And then on Friday night we had our annual FEAST kick-off gathering.

At the FEAST kickoff, everyone there got to know each other a little better. We did so over a glass of wine and some really good hor 'dourves and by playing a particular game. The game went like this. Each person wrote down on a piece of paper five things about themselves and then put the sheets in a basket. Once everyone had done so, we took them out one at a time and read the list, and then the group tried to guess who had written the list.

The purpose was two-fold. The first, of course, was simply for us to have fun guessing who it was that match the list and to discover things about people that we hadn't known. The second purpose, however, the unsaid objective, was to help us realize that we still have a lot to learn about each other.

Did you know that one of our members' grandparent was the Consulate General of three different European countries? Did you know that someone here once owned a hot air balloon? We have a parishioner that in 1969 won an accordion competition? One of our members might never have made it to Redeemer because she, at age two, was saved at the last minute by her older sister from drowning. We have among us a person who served a beer to both Telly Savalas and President Ronald Reagan (probably not at the same time), one whose father was a New York City cop, one who held a deadly tarantula, one who owned and operated a gas station. And those are just the ones that I remember.

God calls us to know each other. He calls us to know each other because we are all special creations of His put in this world for a purpose. Each one gifted in special ways. Each one burdened with particular struggles. Each one able to make an impact on our lives and each one of us on the lives of others. God calls us into relationship.

So I could not help but wonder how different our parable about Lazarus and the rich man might have looked, if they had been open and willing to know the other. If they had been willing to be in a relationship. I wonder how things might have worked out differently, if the rich man had allowed himself to see past the outward appearances in order to encounter a truly faithful man.

It might have gone like this...

There once was a rich man dressed in purple robes and linen. One day he was leaving his home, and as he passed through the gates, he looked and saw a few dogs licking the sores of a man that he had seen so many times that he had pretty much stopped noticing. Well, this time, instead of rushing by the beggar, telling himself in the back of his head that people of his wealth and stature could never associate with the likes of that type of person; he stopped. And it changed his life.

Can you picture it? What might have happened, if he simply stopped and asked Lazarus his name? What might have resulted, if the rich man allowed himself see past those things that got in his way in order to listen to Lazarus's story, and get a glimpse of his faith and encounter God through him, and encounter his humanity through God? What might have happened?

Well,

...maybe, if he had stopped, he might have seen his blessings from a new perspective. Maybe he might have seen his wealth as something that had been entrusted to him, rather than captured by him. Might he have come to see his wealth and possessions as an opportunity, as even a mission, to grow closer to God as he drew closer to Lazarus? Maybe.

...maybe, if he had stopped, his eyes might have been opened to the eternal dilemma facing him and his family. Maybe Lazarus's heart in the midst of his worldly struggle might have served to clear away some of the clutter in the rich man's heart so that he would have been

able to hear Moses and the prophets in a new way. Might that have enabled the rich man to bring the words of Moses and warning of the prophets and, even, the promise of the Messiah to his family so that they too could have looked beyond the fine china and the huge flocks in order to catch a glimpse of the bigger picture for their existence? Maybe.

...maybe the rich man, if he had allowed himself to know the neighbor at his gate, the child of God at his gate, maybe he would have been able to embrace Jesus' teaching about the Messiah and how he had come to serve rather than be served, and he should do the same. If his heart had been softened through his encounter with the man God put at his gate, could the rich man have experienced a new, deeper, and contagious kind of joy that he had never known before? Would that have transformed him as well as transformed the short-sighted expectations of his time?

I don't know. A lot of "what ifs", I guess. I mean, I suppose the rich man already had his opportunity to choose a different way, but he just didn't. And what's done is done, right? No use of playing the "what if" game.

But, you know, there were people who came before the rich man: parents, uncles, neighbors, who had the opportunity to show him a better way, but didn't. Maybe they could have lived the words of Moses more visibly in order to help open the future rich man's eyes to things beyond himself. Maybe they could have shared the hearts of the prophets more diligently in order to help set the rich man on a better path.

Well, whatever. What's done is done, right? Let's not dwell on the past. Lazarus is now with Abraham and the rich man is stuck eternally separated from the joy of heaven, and that is just the way it is.

But I just can't shake the feeling that our story is a story of profound heartbreak. God's heart breaks with every person who chooses his own way instead of God's. God's heart also breaks when he gives someone the opportunity, the privilege really, to show a young person or a struggling person a better way, but they choose to walk on by. God puts opportunities in our lives. He puts the opportunity to respond and become the found sheep instead of the lost sheep. He shows us the way to push past those things that we place above God that keep us rooted in the world. And for some, really for all, God also give the opportunity to be loving shepherd to guide sheep back to the fold in order to hear the sound of heaven rejoicing.

So here is our question. What or who has God put at our gate through whom to give us the opportunity to draw nearer to God? Who is at our gate, or at our work, or in our school who is there to give us the chance to go deeper, and know God more fully, if we would only slow down and connect? Who is it that God has sent into our lives who can show us a deeper understanding of the Love of God.

Or, the question for you might be whose gate have you been sent to? Whose life could you be a glimpse of God for. What person needs you to live the words of Moses more visibly, or share the hearts of the prophets more diligently, or to live the Love of Christ more openly?

Who do we need to see God through more fully and who is it that needs to know God through us? That is the ongoing question that lies at the heart of God's mission for the transformation and the salvation of the world.

Amen.