The Poor Man Has a Name

Read Luke 16:19-31

This is one troubling parable. How can we who are, compared to most of the population in the world, clothed in purple and fine linen and who feast sumptuously every day, identify with anyone else in the story but the rich man? Even the poorest among us worshipping here today are fabulously wealthy compared to many millions of people.

A tradition has developed in my family that every summer or early fall, we have a crab feast on our back deck. Going back to when my kids were little and we would hold them during our time at the Delaware beach town of Fenwick Island. Now our love of those spicy Old Bay seasoned crustaceans has passed on to the next generation. Our grandchildren are now just as crab greedy as the rest of us. Mark claims he was called by God to leave western Pa. and move to his church in Maryland, but I know it was the prospect of living smack dab in the middle of crab country that led him there!

There's a fish market in the heart of the Italian market in south Philly where crabs can be obtained. To get back to New Jersey, you have to drive past a favorite site where panhandlers work to gain the sympathies of the affluent motorists who stop for the light before getting across the Ben Franklin Bridge. Their tattered signs say things like, "Homeless, please help." "Hungry." They do look pretty desperate. You hear people say, "Don't give them anything. They are scam artists. They actually live in nice expensive homes in Society Hill. They'll only use the money to buy drugs."

My daughter said she hates to drive by them because she feels compelled to give them something. I've found myself feeling relieved when the light is green and I can zoom on by. When the light is red I've often just steeled myself to ignore them, eyes front, windows closed, doors locked.

We rich people don't know what to do about the poor. We rich people who confess Christ are even more vulnerable. At all the major cathedrals along the Camino, there were posted by the entryways women begging, eyes downcast,

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straw baskets with a few small coins being shaken to draw attention to them. "Alms for the poor; alms for the poor." In Egypt, amidst the gold and wealth of Pharaohs on down to the present day affluence of the few, you can see people young and old scrounging through the garbage and camping out in cardboard boxes right on the streets of Cairo. The chasm between rich and poor has been with us from time immemorial.

This story of the rich man and Lazarus was not totally original to Jesus though he did give it added depth. Similar stories were told among many of the tribes of the ancient near East. The story was a vehicle for teaching morality, ethics, and wisdom, perhaps around Bedouin campfires before retiring for the night. And perhaps Jesus adapted it for his purposes precisely because it was familiar and most likely because no one could pretend they didn't know what it meant.

The story actually gathers up a central theme running throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, namely that God has a special concern for the poor and needy. And it matters to God how all of us treat them, the hungry, the homeless, the widow, and the orphan. Jesus did not accept the clever ways that the Pharisees and other religious elites had developed to dodge their God-given responsibility to be compassionate and merciful. They even developed a theology that said if you were poor or broken or suffering or victimized by some calamity or other it was because you had sinned and offended the Holy One. The story of the rich man and Lazarus undercuts all these notions. This parable serves as a warning that all such deviousness among those who say they love God comes to a very bad end indeed. Let's delve into a few of the details.

My dad used to urge me to learn everybody's name from the first time I'm introduced because, as he learned in the Dale Carnegie course he took, "How to win friends and influence people," there is no sweeter sound to anyone than the sound of their own name. You all know what a miserable failure I am at this. It takes me months to remember your name, and now at my age, I've known your name for years and sometimes struggle to recall it! Ouch!

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In our story, notice first that the rich man has no name. He has fine clothing and great food, but who is he really? I've known some wealthy people and one thing I've noticed is that they often don't really know who their true friends are. People often just see them for what they have, then covet it, and then sidle up to them, acting like friends as a way to get something from them. The rich learn to be wary. True friends are hard to come by. Defenses need to be up. Vulnerability needs to be reduced to a minimum. A true friend is someone with whom you can be open and vulnerable, someone whom you can trust. True friends are rare for someone with something to lose. People may learn your name yet still only care about what you have and not about who you are.

So we have a nameless rich man. He has defended himself against the needy man, who sits at his very gate. Every time he goes in or out, every time he goes anywhere, there he is. He must walk on by, pretending he doesn't see him. He's preserving his silver and gold, he's not sharing even the crumbs under his table of feasting, but he is totally unaware that he is paying a very dear price for all that avoidance, all that self-willed blindness.

Refusing to see the poor, he begins to lose sight of himself. He begins to be oblivious to the life of the Spirit. He develops the habit of absenting himself from the things that matter to God, not realizing finally that he is fashioning the shape of his own torment. To him, Lazarus has become invisible. He's seen him so often that he no longer even notices him. Lazarus has been merged into the way things are, just like all panhandlers in cities and towns everywhere. We don't really know how to help them so we just turn off our eyes and then our hearts harden a little every day.

The other main character is an abjectly poor human being, extremely hungry, covered with sores that have become drinking fountains for the unclean and miserable street curs that roam the town. But this man has a name. What's in a name?

I have a new granddaughter as you know. We play with her and say over and over, "Hi Kiera; and hi Kiki, our adopted nickname for the young princess." When I recently baptized here into our faith and family, my question of her

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mother was, “What is your child’s name?” Even our life in Christ is accompanied by our name. Often in the Bible, someone who begins to deal with God receives a name change, signifying a change in character. Saul became Paul. Simon became Peter. Our name becomes a peg upon which we hang our identity.

“Who are you? What’s your name?” “My name is Bill, what’s yours?” The rich man doesn’t say, “Hi, my name is rich, or well dressed, or so full I could burst.” The poor man doesn’t say, “Hi, my name is starving or sore covered or dog licked.” No, if asked he would undoubtedly say, “My name is Lazarus.” Just because no human cares enough to ask him his name, God knows his name. And God looks upon him with compassion. And God fashions for him a blessed eternity.

Sooner or later, we get around to asking the questions: “Why didn’t God just send some manna or a Good Samaritan to make up for the rich man’s negligence? Why didn’t God just do a miracle of healing and take away his sores? Why not this and why not that? But this story is bigger than reasons and answers to unanswerable questions. This story is a warning story about outcomes and against spiritual pretence. With anyone, rich or poor, there is always more going on than meets the eye. And there is more at stake too. Most of us spend way too much energy on the futile “why” questions. What we ought to be asking is, “In light of who we know God to be, how should we then live who claim to know him and believe in him?”

In the parable, both men die. Lazarus died and angels came and carried him to be with Abraham. The Jews took great pride in being descendants of Abraham. He was called the father of their faith. Abraham served as the emblem of their spiritual security. “We are children of Abraham. God is pleased with us for that fact alone.”

Unfortunately that belief tended to ripen over and over again into religious presumption and very erroneous theological explanations. “We can treat people the way we want because we are children of Abraham. We can condemn lawbreakers and ignore the poor who have obviously displeased God. They certainly displease us with their importunate demands for our care and comfort.

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Therefore we are justified in explaining why they suffer as they do and why it is okay for us to ignore them. God obviously doesn't care enough to help them so why should we?"

The rich man died and was buried. No sweet chariot swung low to carry him home. He was placed in a hole in the ground and woke up in torment. The thirst was intense and the agony relentless. And isn't it interesting that as he cried out to Abraham for mercy, he requested that Lazarus be the one to deliver it. Why not just ask for water? Why would he attach his request to the one he'd ignored for all those years? I'm guessing that the agony had restored his sight at last. Not only did he see Lazarus, he knew his name, he saw he was precious in God's sight, and he perhaps knew that what he really needed was Lazarus' forgiveness. He himself had been callous and cruel and now he needed help. But alas, it was too late. The chasm between rich and poor, between the haves and "have-nots," had widened to become an unbridgeable gap between the blessed and the damned.

Well this is just a story right? It's just a little morality play? No, no, it's much more than that. Jesus is taking aim at all those, whether old time Pharisees or new time Presbyterians and Methodists and Catholics and Baptists, at whomever will listen that it is of great consequence when we say we believe one thing and then live as though we don't.

If we say we believe that God takes special care of the poor and the needy, what then is required of us who say this is our God? The Jews back then said they believed in Moses and the prophets, all of whom prophesied and preached about God's compassionate care for the poor and needy. But just like most humans in any age we then set about ways to make it so as not be too expensive. Compassion often is inconvenient. Kindness often costs more than you ever thought it would. And real concern is born of ardent devotion to Jesus.

Remember the story of the sinful woman anointing Jesus' feet with precious ointment of great value. And remember the indignation of Judas the eventual betrayer of Jesus who complained, "Why this waste. That ointment could have been sold and the money given to the poor." Judas, under the guise of

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being more spiritual than thou while actually withholding his heart's devotion from Jesus as well as intending to pilfer the money for himself, was seen through by Jesus in an instant. And he replied, "The poor you always have with you, but you will not always have me."

I've been reading The Art of Spiritual Direction, by W. Paul Jones and he says in effect, "If you really love Jesus, sooner or later you'll end up loving and caring for the poor who lay right at your door." Jesus plain teaching is that we dare not ignore the opportunities God sends our way. And his prophetic implication at the very end of the passage is to take care that our hearts do not become so hardened that even the resurrection will fail to get our attention and spark our obedience to the mandates of mercy and compassion that are integral parts of the Gospel we say we believe.

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