

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 28, 2025
The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Frazier
Luke 16:19-21

Life is full of choices. The better off we are, the better are our choices. If we have enough money to purchase a car, we can choose the model car we will drive. Or we can choose which neighborhood we will live in, or which university we will send our children to or where we will spend our vacations. Wealth gives us options.

And our own level of wealth can change the way we see the world. Wealth can give us the ability to customize what we see. If a person is wealthy enough, they can choose to avoid people, places, and things that might cause discomfort or distress. Rich folks can choose to never walk through impoverished neighborhoods, they don't have to mingle with the unemployed, and they don't have to worry themselves about what effect their choices have on those less fortunate than themselves.

Which is why, perhaps, the unnamed "rich man" in our lectionary reading this week chooses *not* to see what's right in front of him. In the parable Jesus tells in the Gospel of Luke, a rich man, dressed in purple and fine linen, "feasts sumptuously every day," while Lazarus, starved and covered in sores, languishes at the rich man's gate.

Though Lazarus is perfectly visible — he longs to gather even a crumb or two from the rich man’s ornate dining table — the rich man neither acknowledges Lazarus’s presence, nor alleviates his suffering. In fact, the neighborhood dogs show the poor man more compassion than his wealthy human counterpart; they at least come and lick his sores.

Eventually, both men die. Lazarus is “carried away by the angels to be with Abraham,” while the rich man ends up in Hades, where the hot flames leave him parched and desperate. In a perfect reversal of his earthly circumstances, the rich man looks up and sees Abraham and Lazarus “far away,” enjoying every comfort.

So he asks “Father Abraham” to send Lazarus over with some cool water to soothe his burning tongue, or, barring that, to send Lazarus as a messenger to his wealthy brothers, who are still alive on earth. “Let Lazarus warn them,” he pleads, so that they’ll change their ways before it’s too late.

But Abraham refuses both requests. The “chasm” separating Lazarus from the rich man is fixed — no one can cross over. And the brothers? The brothers have Moses and the prophets. They know what God requires. They have everything they need in order to repent. If they won’t listen to the wisdom already embedded within their spiritual tradition, Abraham says, “even someone rising from the dead will not convince them.”

Needless to say, this is a grim story. A dire story. But perhaps more importantly, it's an *urgent* story. This story is clear about what's at stake. It doesn't pretend that our years are limitless and our options infinite. This is a story about time running out. About alternatives closing down. This is a story for us.

On its face, the parable is about wealth. Jesus has a great deal to say about wealth in the Gospels, and none of it is easy or comfortable. But one message that reverberates — the key danger Jesus identifies in our the pursuit of material comforts and riches — is the danger of spiritual blindness. Of moral apathy and indifference. Of a fundamental inability to see human need, human suffering, human dignity, and human worth — as real.

In life, it's very likely that the rich man *notices* Lazarus at a superficial level. At the very least, he manages not to trip over the guy each time he leaves his house. Maybe he tosses Lazarus the occasional coin, perhaps he considers whether it's good social policy or bad social policy to give cash to beggars. Maybe he theorizes about "what kind of poor" Lazarus is: "Lazy" poor or "deserving" poor? Down on his luck, or "just" a bum? Truly sick, or pretending? Maybe the rich man says a prayer for Lazarus on the Sabbath. Maybe, when he's with his wealthy friends, he brings up "the poor," and they have an appropriately abstract conversation about "the poverty problem" over dinner.

The problem is, none of this kind of seeing is the way Jesus sees and calls us to see. To risk the vulnerability of relationship. Of kinship. Of solidarity. To see as Jesus sees is to put aside forever all questions of worthiness, and to recognize in the Other—my own self, my own fractured dignity, my own pain, my own mortality. To see as Jesus sees is to implicate myself fully in the stories of other people's hunger, illness, terror, and shame.

To see Lazarus, the rich man needs to recognize his own complicity in the poor man's suffering. He needs to admit that his own inability to say, "I have enough. I have *more* than enough. I have more than enough to share," that lack of awareness is directly responsible for Lazarus's poverty. Or — can we go even further? Maybe the rich man needs to understand that his incapacity to grieve for and sympathize with Lazarus is a fatal sign of his *own* impoverishment. An impoverishment so complete, no amount of linen, purple cloth, or fancy food can remedy it.

This is radical seeing. It is the kind of bold, courageous, and sacrificial seeing that scares us to death — precisely because it asks so much of us. It asks everything of us, and well, good grief, who among us signed up for *everything*?

What's amazing about this parable is how much it takes for granted. The story presumes that Lazarus is righteous and the rich man is not. The story dignifies the poor man with a name, not the wealthy one. The story leaves little doubt in our minds that the rich man's lifestyle is directly to blame for Lazarus's hunger. In every single way, Jesus reverses the hierarchies we live by.

But here is perhaps the scariest part of the story: even after death, the rich man fails to see Lazarus. He carries his privilege all the way to Hades! Though he piously calls on “Father” Abraham, he refuses to see Lazarus as anything other than an errand boy: “Bring me water.” “Go warn my brothers.” No wonder Abraham tells him that the “chasm” separating the two realms is too great to cross. Let’s be clear: God is not the one who builds the chasm. We do that all by ourselves.

You have perhaps heard the term “prosperity theology,” which in part teaches that material comfort is a sign of God’s blessing, and that while “doing my part” for those lying outside the gate might be nice, I have no ultimate moral or spiritual responsibility to tear down the gate.

To me, this notion of “blessing” is mostly contradictory to Jesus’s teachings. When we lock human suffering out, we lock ourselves in. Locking ourselves into lives of superficiality, thin piety, and meaninglessness. As our reading from Paul’s letter to Timothy puts it this week, the refusal to confront my own privilege, the refusal to bear the burdens of those who have less than me, is a refusal “to take hold of the life that really is life.”

When we take a good long careful look at the world, we most likely learn that the truth hurts. It hurts to see that I have feasted while others have starved. It hurts to see that I have lived in ways that imperil the planet. It hurts to see that I have averted my gaze while the suffering of others continues—the

suffering of those who don't look like me, or speak the same language as me, or worship like me, or have the same political views as me.

Perhaps this is why Jesus — our vulnerable Servant King — crosses over the great chasm again and again and again, offering us a way forward. A way of selflessness. A way of sacrifice. A way of losing our lives in order to gain them.

What else do we require? We have Moses. We have the prophets. We have the parables. We have the life, the death, and the resurrection of the Son of God. Like the rich man in the parable, we have everything we need in order to repent, find grace, and offer healing love to the world. What does this mean? It means we are without excuse as we stand inside the gate. What will we do next? Where will our gaze linger? What will we dare to see?