

Being the Man

Series: A Road Trip with Jesus; Luke 16: 19-31; 1 Timothy 6: 6-10

Jesus told a story about a rich man and a beggar. It's a story with dramatic contrasts. I wonder if there's a word in Aramaic that means what hyperbole does in English? Jesus used it a lot.

There was a rich man. Sometimes he's called Dives – which just means *rich man*. He was incredibly rich -- Bill Gates or Warren Buffett rich. Unlike those two, however, this rich man was not redeemed, not thoughtful about how he used his wealth. He was selfish with his wealth.

The poor man named Lazarus was incredibly poor. It was pitiful. He was “covered with sores and dumped on [the rich man's] doorstep {figuratively speaking}.” “All he lived for was to get a meal from scraps off the rich man's table.” He was so poor that he lived off the rich man's garbage. He dined at Dives' dumpster. Actually, that part is not hyperbole. It happens everyday right here in Kansas City. The poor beggar's best friends were the junk yard dogs that came and licked his open running sores. And then the poor man died. Death seemed a blessing to that poor man who had suffered so much.

It was a blessing to see beyond the veil of death, to see the spirit of Lazarus basking in love in the bosom of Abraham. He was spending eternity in the heart of his community represented by ancestor Abraham. He was fully loved, deeply respected, and absolutely at home.

On the other hand, it's the rich man who is the real focus of this story. He lived in unbelievable opulence. He was “expensively dressed in the latest fashions, wasting his days in conspicuous consumption.” Actually, this description of the rich man wasting his days in consuming may not be hyperbole after all when we consider the lifestyles of some of the rich and famous today. We should probably hold that light to ourselves as well. How about us in our climate controlled homes with cars, plenty of clothes and food, running water, and access to medical care? We have choices of where to shop, what to buy, and where to eat. We may not *conspicuously consume*, but compared with most people in the world, we live like kings.

Maybe, as we look to find ourselves in Jesus' story, we should identify not with the beggar, but with the rich man who lives very well and very comfortably. What seems most important is how is wealth and consuming habits lead to his failure to notice the beggar at his doorstep. And it's not always the wealth of money that stands in the way of our noticing the other in our lives. What else can we conspicuously consume? How about time or energy? Is filling our lives with constant activity constant activity that is not core to our life's calling or trying to control every aspect of our lives by resisting what is genuinely new examples of conspicuous consumption as well?

Last Sunday's sermon was called “Sticking it to the Man.” As a congregation who sees ourselves more on the counter-cultural side of things, opposing the establishment and *sticking it to the man*, it may be important that we consider ourselves as actually *being the man*. Our tendency is to identify with the beggar. Perhaps we need to see ourselves in the rich man.

This story is a very pointed critique of the rich, especially in their interaction with the poor. Another of the lectionary scripture texts for today is a passage from the New

Testament book of 1 Timothy. This author chimes in with warnings about the dangers of wealth, including a very famous saying,

those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich, some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.

What a dramatic picture Jesus painted in this story. His use of hyperbole helps us see the marked contrast between the wealth and comfort of the rich man and the poverty and misery of the poor man. Otherwise, they are both children of Abraham, both alive for the time being. Then the tables turn. Lazarus dies and goes to Paradise while the rich man dies and finds himself in torment.

I don't see Jesus teaching us or giving us insider information about called heaven and hell. He was using generally understood, though not universally accepted, images of the afterlife. He was making the point that there is a strong connection between life here and life there. How we live here affects our experience there. Just as important, the reality of there and the priorities of the spiritual world affects how we live here -- what we value here.

Do you remember the rest of the story. The rich man is in torment and asks Abraham to send Lazarus to wait on him and bring him water. In response, he hears some chilling words about the chasm being fixed at death – that there is no crossing over. Again, this is not a teaching about the nature of heaven and hell, but about the reality of the connection between how we live here and what we'll experience there. The rich man's life is so full of himself and his stuff that he has no room for anything else, including the poor man.

When he found out that he couldn't take any of that stuff with him when he left this life, including the prestige and status that came with being rich, he realized that he had nothing, not even a bottle of water. It seems plausible to me that all we take with us from this life into whatever lies beyond is our authentic selves, of spiritual selves including how much we've grown in spirit.

The point of this story seems to be that what we value is shown by how and with which we fill our lives. We as a church are seeking that abundance Jesus promised. As much as we need more money to do more of the good things we feel called to do, the greatest treasure we have is the wealth of the "rich simplicity of [discovering and] being ourselves before God."

The lesson I see in this story is to put ourselves in a position to be able to see the "beggar at our gate." I invite you now to participate in an exercise. Who are the beggars at your gate? Write the names or descriptions of people in your life whom you tend to ignore. Write name(s) of those in your life whom you know, but don't really see most of time. What are the aspects of you own needs, identity, or gifts you tend not to see, value, or appreciate? After you respond, did you have an insight? If so, find another person and share what you've written. (raise hand if you need someone to share with)

It's important to see now – to see the beggar at your gate as you pass by, within your own family, and even within yourself, but it's not enough just to see. The rich man saw Lazarus beyond the grave. He saw him and recognized him, but only for how the

beggar might meet his needs: his thirst and later the need to warn his brothers. When we see the beggars at our gate – notice the ones in our lives we’ve been failing to see – then they become full human beings to us. Then, we are challenged to make the space in our lives to relate to them, to listen to them, and to be open to their needs. When we discover the hidden possibilities of our own lives, we are challenged to treat ourselves as fully human, made in the image of God, and full of potential and possibility.

And it’s not enough just to see or even celebrate the seeing. We need to act, to give of our time, our abilities, and our money. We need to make a difference in people’s lives. Bill Gates is a rich man by any measure. He has discovered the enormous benefits of giving. Through the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation, he has found ways to use his time, abilities, and enormous wealth to make a difference for many people.

The Gates Foundation have become so good at giving that another rich man, Warren Buffett, has decided to give most of his fortune – approximately \$30 billion – to the Gates foundation. He explained the decision with these words: “I got rich because investors thought I could make more investing their money than they could. Bill & Melinda [Gates] can spend my money better than I could.” He went on to explain his choice, proving that he really understood Jesus’ story of the rich man and the beggar. He understands the values of the Kingdom of God, the nature of living in the Spirit:

My gift is nothing.. I can have everything I want with less than 1% of my wealth. ...I’m just giving back surplus claims that have no value to me but can do a lot for others. The people I really admire are the small donors who give up a movie or a restaurant meal to help needier people. (from *Giving* by Bill Clinton)

Jesus calls us to see, to see who is around us and right in front of us. Jesus challenges us to decide what has true value for our lives: love, compassion, mercy, peace, and justice. I invite you to let these values fill you. Let the beggars at your gate fill your sight, motivate your action, and direct your choices today and each day. May they also inspire us as we seek to be church in Jesus’ name every step on the journey. Amen.