

¹⁹“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²²The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴He 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.’ ²⁵But 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. ²⁶Besides 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.’ ²⁷He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house— ²⁸for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ ²⁹Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ ³⁰He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ ³¹He 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.’”

The word of God for the People of God.

Thanks be to God.

Are you sure? Are you sure you want to say, "Thanks be to God?"--to affirm that this is a word that we are thankful for? Today is one among several days when I wonder if a better liturgy might be for me to say, "This is the Word of God for the people of God," and for you to say, "Yikes," or perhaps, "Oh boy..."

This is not an easy text. It's one of those that is perhaps meant to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. So, before we go too far, let me begin by making you a little more comfortable. This, is a parable. It is not meant to be a factual record of what happens when you die. It is not meant to be a full systematic theology, nor is it meant to be a roadmap to heaven. Remember, Jesus' goal is not to tell us how to get to heaven, but rather to tell us how he is bringing heaven to earth. He wants to invite us to find, to cultivate, and even to become, those places where the veil is pierced, and you can't tell where Earth ends and heaven begins. So we can only assume that by telling this parable, Jesus is in some way trying to accomplish that.

Jews and Christians both affirm a time of judgment and vindication. But Jews and Christians both also affirm that that judgment will happen when the messiah returns, or when Jesus returns--not immediately when we die. So I think we can safely make the assumption that Jesus is not trying

to give us a preview of things to come, so that we might get wrapped up and consumed with wondering and picking apart scripture to determine "what heaven is like" and "what hell is like." Jesus is much more concerned with the ways our lives look like kingdom life and abundant life. Luke, the writer of this gospel, in particular, is much more concerned with how we live out that abundant life in the here and now. And if you have any inkling about the life of faith being simply about how I relate to God, the two-way channel between Jesus and me, then this parable is a sharp reminder that our relationship with God cannot be separated from our relationships with the people God loves. More specifically, our relationship with God has something to do with how we treat the poor, the outcast, and other invisible people.

Here's where we start getting a little less comfortable.

It's easy to hear this parable and think that it's all about money, isn't it? Jesus talks about money all the time, especially in the gospel of Luke. Matthew tells us that Jesus said "Blessed are the poor in spirit," but Luke is clear that Jesus meant "Blessed are the poor." It is Luke who has the angel tell Mary that she will bear the messiah, and Mary responds with her beautiful magnificat, enumerating the economy of God's kingdom, telling what God is doing: "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." And it is in Luke where we find Jesus' claim that he has come, and been anointed by the Spirit to preach good

news to--whom? To the poor. Luke is definitely interested in making the point that faithful stewardship of money and goods is a key aspect of kingdom life, and abundant life.

But the rich man's problem is not that he has money. The wealth itself is not the issue--rather the issue is that his wealth has led to self-absorption, as it so often does. It has led him to greater and greater focus on himself--to dressing himself in purple and fine linen, to feeding his face, feasting sumptuously every day--he has become completely absorbed with himself, so much that he can't see beyond his own nose. He can't see Lazarus, the man who has been lying at his door every day, who he has practically had to step over coming and going--he can't see him. It's as if Lazarus is invisible, or perhaps it's that the rich man has a vision problem--a seeing problem.

In Luke, seeing is linked with compassion. It is when Jesus *sees* a woman grieving at the death of her son that it says He "had compassion for her" and revived the son. Even in the parable of the prodigal son, as the son is walking up the road returning to his father's house, Luke tells us the father *saw* the son from far away and was "filled with compassion." Seeing, in the best cases, leads to compassion. But the rich man can't even seem to make that connection--when he finally sees Lazarus in the afterlife, he notices him across the chasm--he sees him--and he actually knows his name, but still, even still, he doesn't actually speak to him; instead he speaks to Abraham *about him*.

There are any number of things that make it hard for us to see one another today. We are more private, trying to keep our public lives neat and tidy. We build freeways through the run-down neighborhoods so that we don't have to drive slow enough to look at them, to see those who dwell there. In an effort to avoid awkwardness, we avert our eyes from the dirty, disheveled person on the metro or the sidewalk, trying to be polite. There's something of a desensitizing factor that clouds our vision, too. I can't help but wonder how much more impacting it was fifty years ago to show pictures of children in impoverished countries, how much more effective those pictures were at shocking us and summoning our compassion. These days, in a media and image-rich culture, we are almost immune--inoculated to the visual reality of poverty.

Even that word, "inoculate," is about seeing. We know it as a synonym for vaccinate. It was originally used in the 18th Century with regard smallpox, where they would put a little bit of the virus into your body in order to develop your immunity to the disease. But literally, it means to put something into--in...oculus--in the eye. So perhaps as we put something in our eye often enough, if we see something often enough, our very eye will develop immunity, so that we cannot see the thing that is before us--we cannot see the man lying at our doorstep. We have a seeing problem.

Contrast this story, then, with the story in Acts, chapter 3, also written by Luke, where we find Peter and John headed to the temple for prayer, a

path they had trodden many times. Hear Luke's words: One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o'clock in the afternoon. ²And a man lame from birth was being carried in. People would lay him daily at the gate of the temple called the Beautiful Gate so that he could ask for alms from those entering the temple. ³When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked them for alms. ⁴Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, "Look at us." ⁵And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. ⁶But Peter said, "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk." ⁷And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. ⁸Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God.

What a contrast. Not only do Peter and John see the man, they look intently at him, and then they ask him to look at them. They are not only willing to look, to notice him, but they are also willing to be seen. They recognize that he, too, has the power to see, and that they, too, have the need to be seen. You see, church, we need to be open to the reminder that we, too, are in need, even when our financial status would indicate otherwise. How vulnerable it is to allow ourselves to be seen, for our neediness to be open for viewing. And so somehow, in seeing one

another, the way is opened for the power of Christ to do much more than buy this man's lunch. "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk." Friends, it is when we see one another, when we see the invisible ones in our community, when we open ourselves to be seen, to be friends with those who are kept out of sight, it is then that seeing leads to compassion, which leads to power of God changing and transforming our lives. When we see with God's eyes, we become available to God's power.

At its heart, this parable is about how the kingdom of God comes where we least expect it. And what the parable lays before us is the uncomfortable truth that we have a vision problem. We have a problem seeing, and so, honestly, when glimpses of the kingdom are before us, when God's promise is right in front of us, lying at the door to our own home, we may miss it entirely. And when I'm real honest, I'll admit that I'm probably missing it because it's not all about me.

Friends, I trust that I am not alone in this vision problem, this cloudiness of sight, this tendency to make others invisible. And if Abraham's words to the rich man are true, our vision problem will not be overcome quickly, by a moving video or a powerful testimony, much less by this sermon. "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone rises from the dead." As powerful as those moments are, those moments where the light breaks through and we feel that we can finally see, and we want to be different, we want to think less of

ourselves, work less for ourselves, spend less on ourselves...that wanting, those intentions will fade in a moment. That moving moment will not have the staying, transforming power of the day-to-day discipline of self-sacrifice. The day to day prayer to "Give me eyes to see." The habit of sabbath, when we can move slowly enough to see clearly. The discipline of giving just a little more away, a dollar, or ten, or a hundred dollars more than we think we can give, to clear our sight from the fear that we won't have enough. The time spent in service, not only seeing, but serving those who might otherwise go unseen. The relationships of community, opening ourselves to see and be seen by others. The day-in, day-out practices of faith--this is what makes our vision strong; these are the things that, over time, open our eyes to the world, to brothers and sisters, to God in our midst.

Let us pray.

O Lord, give us eyes to see--open our eyes, peel away the scales and help us to see those we have ignored or avoided. Give us discipline for those practices that open us to your vision. Give us the courage to allow ourselves to be seen. And in all of this, give us a glimpse of your kingdom; make us the people, make this place, where heaven and earth meet, and in seeing one another, we see you.

Summary: The Parable of the Rich man and Lazarus uncovers our difficulty in seeing beyond ourselves. But when we learn to see with God's eyes, we become open to the power of God to bring transformation in and around us.