

Luke 16: 19-31 Being Blind or Just Not Seeing

Our passage today is another one which is unique in Luke's gospel. We still seem to be in the situation where Jesus is talking in front of a mixed audience—the disciples are there and the parable about the distribution of wealth is directed at them; those sinners and tax collectors are still gathered around, but are just absorbing and not making any comments. It seems that like the parables about the seeking of that which was lost was directed at the third grouping after their grumbling about the company Jesus keeps, so it is the third group—the Pharisees to which Jesus directed that teaching who have made themselves the focus of another teaching. At the end of last week's parable we read the familiar statement of verse 13—You cannot serve God and wealth. Today's story does not immediately follow that story, but it is prefaced by what easily serves as a reminder to whom Jesus is speaking. Verse 14: "The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him." Jesus gives them a warning that the justifications that they make for themselves about money might convince others of their righteousness, but that God knows their hearts and the kingdom of heaven is entered not by force but by adherence to God's will. To illustrate this point Jesus again begins a story which features a rich man, a man who enjoyed the good things of life. He dressed in purple and fine linen and feasted sumptuously every day. Notice that in this description of the man what we know about him is that he is very wealthy to be able to live like that. We are not given any specific laws or commandments that he is breaking—we are not told that he gained the wealth in any unscrupulous way, just that he possessed wealth which allowed him to live this way. Although in many commentaries on this story, the rich man is given a name—Dives—that really wasn't his name—just the Latin word for a rich man. In this story the rich man is anonymous. The second character introduced in this story is a poor man. The rich man's state is contrasted with that of a poor man named Lazarus. It's usually the other way around—the rich and famous are named—the poor are usually unnamed and faceless. This man is so poor that he is covered with sores that the dogs come and lick. He sits at the rich man's gate and longs to satisfy his hunger with the crumbs which fall from the rich man's table. We are given no other information about the men before we are told both men die. Here again there is a dramatic contrast in their status after death. The poor man is carried by angels to "Abraham's bosom". The rich man finds himself in Hades where he is being tormented in flames. The destination of the poor man introduces the third character in this story—Abraham. In the Jewish tradition the figure of Abraham was very important—he was the one known as the friend of God; the one with whom the covenant for the Promised Land was made. He was known for his obedience to God and his righteousness. And for context in this story, we also know that he was a wealthy man. But he was known for his hospitality to the stranger—for the greeting and preparing of rich feasts for guest. The story Jesus tells involves these three figures—a rich man who indulges himself daily, a poor man who doesn't even get crumbs from the rich man's table, and the patriarch of the faith—who was also a rich man but one who shared the bounty of his table. It seems that in this story the characters after death are visible to one another—and communication is possible. The rich man looks up from his position in Hades. In the distance—far from where he is, he sees Abraham with Lazarus by his side. So he speaks up. He doesn't speak to Lazarus, but to Father Abraham: "Father Abraham, have mercy on me." The mercy he

seeks is that Lazarus be sent to bring him some water to cool his tongue—he wants his torment eased and seems to think Lazarus, the poor man who sat at his gates unaided should be sent to do this. It is interesting that this detail tells us that the rich man knew Lazarus's name. The man had been sitting at his gate as he went about his business. Their paths probably crossed, but while the rich man lived a life of abundance with daily sumptuous feasts, he did not notice Lazarus' plight—not even to provide crumbs. This request also shows us that the rich man's torment has taught him little. He still hopes to be served as he considered his due. Abraham's response is "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." Additionally, the rich man is informed that the distance that he perceives represents a "great chasm which has been fixed." This distance cannot be bridged from either direction—not only can the rich man not cross to Abraham, but even if Lazarus wants to go to his aid, he cannot. Lazarus himself offers no comment. There is no sense that he relishes the plight of the rich man. In fact, when Abraham explains about this gulf which exists he addresses the rich man a child. Abraham says Lazarus is receiving comfort—there is no mention of sumptuous feast—but comfort. No more painful sores. The description of the chasm indicates that it has been there all along—the divide between how the rich man lived and how Lazarus lived—what is different is that it is now fixed. All the possibilities of crossing from one side to the other are gone—the choice was made before death. The rich man then makes another request of Abraham—a request for another mission for Lazarus. "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 also not come to this place of torment." So the brothers also are expected to know and recognize Lazarus. Abraham's reply to this is also a refusal but again, it is said with kindness. "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them." In other words—God has revealed to them through Moses and the prophets what choices they should be making. The rich man then contends that if Lazarus does this task, since his appearance would be one coming from the dead, they will repent. It seems that the rich man now acknowledges that his life choices were not according to what he knew they should be—his brothers need to be warned so they can repent of their life choices while they still can make a different choice. The final verse of this passage is Abraham's voice: "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." Like most of scripture there are many lessons for us today from this passage. The feature which usually first grabs our attention is that great chasm of separation which is bridgeable in this life but fixed after death. The rich man when he went in and out of his gate had the opportunity to cross that chasm. He could have said, "Who is that poor soul at my gate? Bring him in, clean him up and give him something to eat." Although after death the rich man knew enough about Lazarus to call him by name, to know that he was of a lower status and thus according to the way he had lived in life was someone who he felt could be sent to serve him, during life he passed him by. It seems to me that is the sin of the rich man which caused the chasm to be fixed. It wasn't that he had wealth—Remember that Abraham was also a rich man. It wasn't really that he dressed in expensive clothes and daily ate sumptuous meals—it was that those crumbs from his table were not shared with the poor man at his gate. Although he physically saw Lazarus, knew him in the sense he could identify who he was—he failed to see his need while he sat at the gate.

Throughout the gospel accounts of the things Jesus did during his ministry there are many accounts of the way Jesus healed those who came to him—including the curing of physical blindness. The rich man was not physically blind, but he was blind to the needs of those around him. What is being held against the rich man is not his wealth per se, but his blindness to the needs of one whom the teachings of Moses and the prophets should have made visible. The rich man failed to bridge that gap between his life experiences and that of Lazarus. We not only have those teachings, but we also have the teachings of one who accomplished what Lazarus was not sent to do—he died and rose again. Yet the chasm still exists today, and in our comfortable lives we are often blind to the needs of others that we pass by and do not see. These needs include those things represented most often by what results from our understanding of abundance—our desire to feast sumptuously and have the things which wealth provides. Some of that goes back to our tendency to feel abundance is when we have all we desire. There is another way to achieve that feeling—it is to be satisfied with what we have for we do not live the life of extreme wealth or poverty that is described for either of these characters. This story is a call to us to look around and truly see the Lazarus' at our gates. I think the disturbing events of this past week play a role in how we need to approach this text. Our blindness often goes beyond failing to see the poverty of material things to the blindness we have toward others and their needs to live with dignity and respect. We don't cross the chasm in this life to see the other—to recognize them as God's child by welcoming them into our consciousness as individuals. What happened this week reflects the great chasm between members of our community where a large number of those members are telling us that they feel they are not seen. In this story, we are represented by the brothers who need to be warned. The question is whether or not we will hear the Scriptures and repent. Will we be healed of our blindness toward others and their needs? In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.