

September 25, 2022

16th Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 16:19-31 1 Timothy 6:6-19

Pastor Ann Hultquist

Last Tuesday I came into the church office and the first thing Julie said to me was “Did you see outside on the north side of the sanctuary?”

Oh no, I thought (as your mind, might too): Graffiti? A fire? Someone put up a tent there? But what I actually said was “No, what about it?”

“It’s all cleaned up,” she said. “Property cleared out a bunch of the bushes and everything that was just overgrown and blocking the windows. It looks great!”

“I didn’t notice,” I admitted.

“Here,” she said, “I’ve got before and after pictures.”

I looked on her phone and she was right--the transformation was amazing! But I had walked right by without seeing any of it.

“Did you see that?!” someone says, pointing out something wonderful or awful or beautiful. “What?” you say. “I didn’t see anything.” Maybe you had your head down, glued to your phone; or you were looking the other way; or you were thinking about something else. We all do it, not noticing what’s right there in the sky, on the field, or in our own yard.

The parable that Jesus tells today is about *noticing* or maybe, willfully *not noticing*.

We shouldn’t envision the rich man living in some kind of a planned community, cut off from Lazarus and the rest of the world, only seeing him as he leaves through the gate to go take care of business dealings. A deluxe home in the first century had a stone front which faced the street, and not like our homes, where there is some kind of set-back and a yard--the front door was right on the street! And next to the front door was a stone bench, built in--called “the beggar’s bench” (you can see them in the ruins of Pompeii among other places.) Its name says it all--it was a place for those in need to wait, hoping and expecting to receive something from the household inside.

We sometimes talk about the 1% in our world today, those whose wealth exceeds our imagination. In 1st century Palestine, and really throughout the Roman colonies, 90% of people lived at subsistence level or below it. That means living from day to day or even meal to meal. Those with money, homes, and food were expected to provide for those who had none of those things. Jewish believers were *commanded* to: love God, love your neighbor, and provide for the poor--to do less was to forget all that God had done.

The rich man doesn't just *not notice* that Lazarus lies right outside his door. He has to put blinders on and also plugs his ears. What he is called to do, what the community expects him to do--he won't do it. What he has--food, beautiful clothes, a safe home--is where he places his focus, until the day he dies. That's when *his* trouble starts: he isn't at all where he thinks he *should* be. For the first time he *notices* Lazarus, doesn't he? Lazarus seems to have gotten a great deal in eternity. But even then, all he wants to do is *order him around*. Compassion? Empathy? Repentance? Nope. Nothing.

Now, Jesus doesn't intend for this parable to be a literal description of what happens to people when they die. And Jesus is not trying to teach that only by doing good things can someone avoid hell and get into heaven. It's a follow up to that somewhat confounding parable told last week, which ended with Jesus saying bluntly "You can't serve God and money." It's as if Jesus then said "Here's what I mean: there was a rich man...and at his gate..."

I'm guessing that if we really hear this parable, we feel convicted this morning. There isn't a poor unhoused person huddled by our front door, but they are certainly everywhere else. "Love God, love your neighbor"--*we* know that commandment, too. And we know who Jesus spent most of his time with during his ministry. And still, we pull up to the red light, see the cardboard sign and think "Don't make eye contact." or we agonize: "How do I know they really need help? I know there are people who need help. What can I do? What *should* I do?" And then the light turns green.

The answers to these questions and so many more are not obvious. But to ask them is to *notice*. To feel convicted is to *notice*: notice disparity, prejudice, and privilege. Notice how the lives of some are used as pawns in a game. Notice how judgmental we are when compassion is what's called for. Notice how much love and grace Christ gives us--not to hold onto and hoard, but to give away.

That's how the writer of 1st Timothy concludes their letter to a young follower of Jesus. Did you hear it when AJ/Kari read these final sentences? "As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share...so they may take hold of the life that really is life."

We have been given so much. We can't fix *everything*, but we can do *something*. We make such a painful mistake when we pretend that all we have is all ours to do anything we want to with. It is painful for the world and our neighbors; and painful for each of us, because we miss out on the life that really *is* life, life that is grounded in Christ's love, in gratitude, and generosity.

We are called to alleviate suffering, as a congregation, and as individuals. We are called to compassion. We are called to notice.