

Same Planet, Different Worlds

Luke 16:19-31

The title for the sermon today was shamelessly borrowed from one of my favorite Far Side cartoons. In the top panel it shows a young man who is lying in bed thinking to himself, “I wonder if she knows I exist... Should I call her? Maybe she doesn’t know I exist? Well, maybe she does. I’ll call her. But what if she doesn’t know I exist? Dang.” And in the bottom panel of the cartoon a young woman is lying in her bed thinking, “You know, I think I really like vanilla.”

The parable in today’s reading is also about two people who live on the same planet, but in very different worlds. One of those people lives in a fine house with a pool and a greenhouse and a huge garage to hold all of his cars. He has people who clean for him, people who cook for him, people who drive him wherever he wants to go, people who take care of the yard for him. All that’s left for him to do is make his money, and figure out to spend his money. And throw parties for his friends and influential people. The only thing he lacked, at least in the parable, was a name, and in the end, that turns out to be a pretty significant thing to be without.

The other person in this parable only had one thing to his name – a name. Lazarus. He doesn’t appear to have had a home. He certainly didn’t have anything to eat. His only friends were four-legged, and frankly, they don’t appear to have been very good company. All they cared about were his open sores. While the other person spent his day making money and enjoying the plentiful fruits of his labor, Lazarus spent his day just waiting at the end of his driveway, hoping that one of those fruits would fall to the ground and roll in his direction. He would have been perfectly happy with last week’s leftovers that they cleaned out of the fridge, but he never even got that.

Then one day the scales finally balanced and death came for both of them. Maybe they both lived to a ripe old age. Maybe disease finally got the better of Lazarus and overindulging got the better of the rich man, who knows. But after his decent and decadent burial the rich man was dragged down to the netherworlds, and after being tossed unceremoniously into the potters’ field, Lazarus was carried on angel’s wings up to rest in the bosom of Abraham. And it was there, for the very first time ever, that the rich man took notice of him.

That, in the end, is what ended up condemning the rich man. It wasn’t that he was rich. It wasn’t the big house or the collection of cars or the servants. It wasn’t the insane bounty of food that was presented to him every day at every meal. It was the fact that he never, ever noticed that just outside his gates lay a sick and starving man. A person in need. I’m sure he knew that people like that existed out there, somewhere, but they might as well have lived on another planet. Their paths never crossed, their worlds never collided.

I’m also sure that he wasn’t a completely heartless man. If someone from the local non-profit agency had made an appointment and come to him asking for help, a contribution, he probably would have given, maybe even generously. Who could say no, when someone out there was doing so much good, and when he clearly had the resources to help? He was happy to help someone else help them. He didn’t want people to starve to death.

But if he was anything like us, there were probably two things that kept him from really seeing poor Lazarus. Two questions in the back of his mind that kept him from seeing him.

The first was, is it enough? Is it ever enough? Say I open the gates to poor Lazarus and give him a meal, or enough food for the whole day, the whole week, the whole month. Then what about next month? Or if he's homeless, where is he going to put it? Or what if I get him set up in an apartment somewhere; get his stomach filled and his sores tended to by a doctor? Then what about the next guy? Or the hundreds, thousands of other Lazarus' out there who are just like him? There's just too many. Their needs are just too great, and if I open my gates to one, and really see him, I will be overwhelmed and despair will seep into my heart and bones, because I know that I can't do enough, and there is no end to this. So the gates stay closed; the eyes averted.

The other question he probably had going in the back of his mind was: can I bear it? If I open my eyes to see the poor and the suffering around me, will I be able to bear it? Life is so much easier to live if you can avoid pain and heartache and misery. Why get involved in someone else's if I don't absolutely have to? Why take on someone else's problems, especially when the odds are good that it will demand something of me that I'm not ready to give or give up. The only thing harder than misery you can't fix is misery that costs you something. Can I still feel good about my life and what I have and the way I live if I see firsthand the needs that are out there? What will I have to give up if I open my eyes and my gates?

But Jesus never asked us to fix all the problems of the world. He just asked us to love our neighbors. And as to the cost part, well, that he did ask us to take on. You can't very well bear one another's burdens or carry your cross and come out unscathed. But in a good way, the way a rock is worn smooth by years of being tumbled around in a river.

The world is full of Lazarus'. Johnson City is full of Lazarus'. No matter how hard we try not to think about them, they are lying just outside our gates, waiting for our paths to cross, our worlds to collide. Waiting, not just for a handout, or a meal, but for us.

You heard this morning that one of the goals set by the session was for Covenant to become more deeply involved in some form of ministry to the community. Something that will probably cost us, but something that will also let us do what we do best – become a part of someone's life; invest ourselves in someone who needs us. We don't know yet what form that might take, but we do know this: when we take the risk and look into the eyes of a homeless person, or a battered woman, or a child whose parents are in jail, we are looking into the face of Christ.

So what we are asking is that you pray with us, and for us. Be a part of the conversations and decisions about our mission efforts. And then join us. Someone out there is waiting for us. For you.