

1 Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16.19-31

Two summers ago, I served on the hotel life staff at the ELCA's National Gathering for high schoolers in Atlanta Georgia. These were two weeks in the city of Atlanta with 35000 high schoolers and their chaperones. Two weeks of music, worship and adventure, and in the case of the hotel life team, of taking care of those in our charge. Being on hotel life meant that I was on a small team of people who were assigned a specific hotel, and we were to make sure that the groups in our hotel knew as much as they could about the city and the gathering. We did orientation with them, we led worship for them, and we did evening activities with them.

One of the things that I found most interesting about this experience, and trust me, there were a lot of things to find interesting, was our training. We were given a bit of training in worship, and told about the schedule of the events, but what made it interesting was what were told over and over to stress with youth especially, but also the adults, was that under no circumstances, by no means were they to interact with the homeless and street people in Atlanta.

We were given many valid reasons to tell the youth this...one of the main ones being a safety concern. When you are talking to high school age kids, many of whom have never been out of their hometown, encountering someone on the street who is asking for money or help can be an overwhelming thing. We did not want the youth to get into situations that they could not control or get out of if they turned dangerous. It was quite simply something that we had to tell the kids about. What the youth weren't told about was some of the preparation for the event that happened before they got there.

They weren't told that the police had been working with the gathering to try and move the homeless people to parts of the city that the youth weren't going to be in. They hadn't been told that the hotels that were chosen for the event were ones that would put the kids in parts of the city that unusually had less incidences. All they were told was to have nothing to do with 'those people' and that everything would be fine.

What this information tended to do was scare the youth. Maybe this was the goal...because they were scared of the people around the city that were not part of the event; they stuck close to their advisors and interacted very little with the people around them. Yes, many did service projects like cleaning up parks and the like, but the people were ignored and avoided as if they weren't there to begin with.

We were lucky to spend those two weeks in Atlanta, and with very little incidence. The few things that did happen, however, only led to confirm the fears that had been put in place, and in some ways made the thoughts of the youth and their advisors go from a slight fear and nervousness to some rather judgmental thoughts. How dare they come to the city when we are here? How dare they ask us for money? How dare they ask for help from us who are here to worship and praise God?

Now, in a lot of ways, the warnings were necessary. We did want to keep the youth safe

and sound and return them home having had good experiences, and not too many bigger than life stories to tell. But in the process of doing that, I think that we very well might have been attempting to turn those 35000 Lutheran teenagers into a bunch of rich old men.

Now what could I possibly mean by that? When you look at our Gospel lesson for tonight, we see a familiar tale about the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man who wore expensive purple clothing and ate 'sumptuously every day' as the text told us. He was well off, and really didn't have to worry about much of anything. And to be honest, that's all we are flat out told about him. He was rich, he ate a lot and he liked to wear purple. This doesn't really make him a bad guy, does it? We don't know the circumstances of his wealth, nor do we know what he did everyday other than eat and wear purple. Well, maybe we do know a little more.

The next person we meet is Lazarus. He's poor. That's putting it lightly. He's dirt poor. He lives outside someone's house begging for food. He's probably not the nicest thing to look at either. The text tells us that the dogs would lick his sores. Not really the kind of person you want camped out outside your front door...but hard to miss.

Now even though we don't know a lot about the facts of these men's lives, we can infer from the text that they probably knew of each other. Lazarus knew of the rich man, obviously, because he lived where he did. In from of the gate, just dreaming of the day that he might have a meal even close to what the rich man ate every day.

The rich man knew who Lazarus was, at least on some level. When he is being tortured by thirst, he asked Abraham to "send Lazarus to dip his finger in water and cool my tongue." He knew who that was that he could see at a great distance. It was the man who was always outside of the gate. The one that we went out the side door to avoid. The one that we haven't been able to get rid of. The one that we try not to see as we go by. Now, we have to give the rich man a little bit of leeway...if he was a religious rich man, he would have been avoiding Lazarus for his own safety...coming too close, and heaven forbid touching him, would have made himself unclean and therefore not worthy of anything that he had. But that is no excuse, is it?

This of course has to raise a question about the rich man...if he knew of Lazarus...even to the point of knowing his name, why didn't he at least send the scraps of the table...just one meal...out to the gate so that this man could eat? He wouldn't have had to go out himself...he could have just sent a servant with things. Unfortunately, we can't answer that question.

The only thing that we do know is that he obviously didn't do this, because he ended us in Hades and Lazarus ended us in Abraham's bosom...a most wonderful place to be. It's clear which is the place that the reader is to strive to end up...even the rich man figures that out. And then he starts to worry about his family that he has left behind (I have to admit that I find this concern a little bit comforting...he has a bit of a heart, at least.)

This next part of the Gospel is where I think that we fell short in our attempt to turn the youth in Atlanta into rich old men. Abraham tells the man that the people have Moses and the prophets and they should listen to them. We have to read between the lines and

realize that he is telling the old man as well that you had Moses and the Prophets, and you didn't learn from them...it's your own fault you're thirsty and hot now. Asking for someone to be raised from the dead to teach his brothers, is a big request, isn't it? It's one that really can't be done, and Abraham points out that that probably won't teach them anyway.

Now what about our quickly aging teenagers in Atlanta? They were told to avoid the people who were right in front of their faces...they were told that helping them could make situations worse, and that it was only to keep them safe. These were true statements, but did the youth just leave it there?

No, in a lot of ways they amazed us. Not one evening devotion went by that the youth didn't pray fervently for the people of the city, that their needs be met, that their lives be improved, and that they would come to know the Gospel. They did service projects that indirectly helped people, and in some cases, when it seemed safe, they directly interacted with the people of the city.

So where did we fall short in our orientation quest of turning these youth into the rich man who was somehow able to ignore what was right in front of his face? What made how they reacted to the world different?

Well, basically, I think that Abraham was inaccurate in his final statement in our Gospel for tonight. He said that no one who had Moses and the prophets would be convinced if they saw someone raised from the dead. These youth were in this city to praise and worship AND SERVE a risen savior...a man...just like they were...who had been raised from the dead. And for that reason, they were willing to look at what...at who was right in front of their faces and to know that they could serve them.

Not only have we been given the witness of someone who was raised from the dead, we don't have to wait for our own death's to make the choice, for you see, we have already died. We have died to sin, and in the waters of baptism we are raised to new life...life in the risen savior. What an opportunity we have been given! We know that we have been given this gift of life only through the life, death, and RESURRECTION of Jesus Christ.

So what does that mean for us here today? Does it mean that we are to go out and fix the problems of others, to feed every homeless person we see, to know that we are going to be rewarded for the good things that we do in this life? By no means! We should never do anything looking for the great reward that it will bring us.

Instead, we should look at the cross...look at the empty tomb, and look at the waters that were poured over us in our baptism. Look at the person that that has made, and to rejoice in the fact that we have been given the chance to live this life...this call to live a life in Christ. Your call might be to help the homeless in your area, or your call might be to help those whose homes were seemingly washed away. Or your call might simply be to take a child's hand into your own as they pray to God at night. Whatever that call is, we can rejoice in knowing that God is walking beside us, opening our eyes to what is right in front of us, and showing us the way to everlasting life. Thanks be to God for that.

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