

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Pastor Nancy R. Easton

Sunday, September 26, 2004  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Amos 6:1a, 4-7; Psalm 146;  
1 Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Sunday school teacher asked her students to name rich people they knew of, and it really wasn't a difficult task at all. They said Bill Gates, Warren Buffet, Brittany Spears, the family of Sam Walton of Wal-Mart fame, and there were even some who were known by first name alone, they were so rich and so famous, the Donald, Oprah. Then she asked her class to name people they knew who were poor, maybe really poor, maybe even homeless, perhaps even those who had to beg. For a while, the room was silent, then the answers came – the guy who sleeps back behind the shopping mall, and that crazy lady who always asks for money out in front of McDonald's. Words flew back and forth, and there was a litany of people, always nameless, but noticed. And then one young man in the Sunday school class said, "My biological dad". Their mouths fell open. Here was someone really known, no longer nameless. The sudden proximity of the destitute poor to the affluent students in that Sunday school class was an eye opener for them, an eye opener because the poor were supposed to be located at a distance from them – they're in the city, they're in slum neighborhoods, they're out there on the periphery.

The proximity of Lazarus to the rich man should be an eye opener to anyone listening to Jesus. Lazarus is near. He is right there at the gate of the rich man's house. Now before Lazarus gets discounted as merely an annoying panhandler, I think that our English translation does not do due justice to his situation. It says that Lazarus "lay at the rich man's gate". It's in a passive form of the verb, so it means that someone put him there; maybe a good-hearted soul who thought that when they put him there in front of the rich man's gate, he might have a better chance of receiving something, some morsel, somehow. It could have been someone for evil thoughts, who literally tossed him there, threw him there to get him out of their way. Whatever, Lazarus lay right there at the gate of the rich man's house, and he was there every day. And every day the rich man dressed up to the hilt, right down to his fine Egyptian linen underwear, and he ate to his fill. Every day. And every day Lazarus was near enough that, had the rich man given any thought to it, he could have wiped the grease off his hands with a piece of bread and tossed it outside the gate where Lazarus could have gnawed on it. But of course, the rich man never did give any thought to that. Not a crumb goes to Lazarus. And Lazarus dies.

So does the rich man. And here, in this second portion of the parable, is what I think is the ultimate revelation and the ultimate self-indictment of the rich man. That the rich man never cared about the suffering of the man at his gate is horrible enough, but now we learn the devastating truth: the rich man knew Lazarus was there at his door all along. Lazarus wasn't some nameless, faceless beggar, he was noticed, he was known by name, and then ignored.

We discover this when the rich man ends up in Hades and he's tormented by the fires and tries to get some water to cool himself down. He tells father Abraham, "Send Lazarus to dip the finger in the cool water and cool my tongue." Oh he knows the man at the gate after all. And he incriminates himself by admitting the name of this pathetic beggar, and his statement – no, his command – shows that he hasn't changed one bit. What is it they say? A leopard doesn't change its spots. Condemned to Hades, the rich man is still ordering folks around to satisfy himself. Having ignored Lazarus in the earthly life, having been unwilling to draw anywhere near to a homeless man with sores, the rich man conveniently invokes Lazarus' name to get what he wants. "Send Lazarus. Have Lazarus serve me."

Nope. Not allowed, according to Abraham. In fact, not possible. Too much of a chasm exists between the bosom of Abraham and the bowels of Hades.

Okay, considers the rich man, let's go to plan B. Send Lazarus to my father's home, to my five brothers. Warn them about what's going to happen if they don't change their ways.

No can do, replies Abraham. Besides, they already have Moses and the prophets. They already have the word of God, which clearly and consistently calls the people of God to live justly. To share the gifts of God with others. To have compassion for the poor. Abraham tells the rich man it's highly unlikely that if someone hasn't listened all this time to the word of God, to Moses and the prophets, they're not going to suddenly start listening to someone even if they should come back from the dead.

By the end of this parable Abraham sounds pretty cynical. He figures a leopard can't change its spots.

In her autobiographical novel, Nora Gallagher tells a story about the small group that she was in at her church where they had a regular Bible study on a weekday evening. They sat around one evening discussing the 16th chapter of Luke and, in fact, this very parable. The group sat there and dissected the parable and examined its parts and considered the levels and layers of meaning. One person offered her interpretation; she said, "If one goes through life without seeing the beggar at the gate, if that person is invisible to you, you may get to the point where you see less and less and then not at all, and finally you can't even see God. The chasm becomes too wide, and God becomes invisible."

Then someone else in the group spoke up. This person was a first timer with the study group. They didn't know anything about him. He said, "I spent today walking, trying to find a place to take a nap. In shoes too big for my feet, because someone gave them too me. The shoes hurt my feet. The other night I tried to sleep outside, but I didn't have a blanket." And then he talked for a while about the long, cold night and how hard it was to sleep, with feet that hurt. And when he was done talking, there was complete silence in that room. The proximity of his homelessness to the affluent people in that room was an eye-opener.

Abraham in our parable was pretty cynical about the rich man's brothers, about how they probably couldn't change their spots, wouldn't change their ways, would never consider bearing the fruit of repentance, as John the Baptist would term it. But Jesus tells this parable, and Luke records it, for some reason. And we hear it again and again here in worship. I think there are three very important reasons why we hear it again and again.

First, Jesus in this parable reminds us of the proximity of the nearness of the poor and needy to those of us who live affluently and comfortably and sometimes even sumptuously. They're not on the periphery out there, but every day they can be found at our gates, in our community, in our schools, in our work places, in our Bible study, in our Sunday school classes, in the pew beside us. We can't miss them. Unless we choose to miss them. The reality of the nearness of the poor is intended by Jesus to open our eyes.

Second. Someone has come back from the dead to be near to us. It is our Lord Jesus. Crucified, risen from the dead, he comes to his church every day to be near to us. He comes to show us God, the very light of truth. He comes to move us to repentance, to bring us his forgiveness, and to call us to holy living. We can't miss Jesus Christ, unless we choose to miss him. The reality of his nearness is intended by Jesus to open our eyes.

Third. Our Lord God is particularly near those who suffer. We cannot miss that in scripture, unless we choose to miss it. Throughout Luke's Gospel we see Jesus in solidarity with people who are suffering, with the poor and the needy and the outcast and those people who have been rendered invisible by every other part of society. They are not invisible to him. They are known and they are loved and treasured and they are promised blessings.

Jesus goes to the cross to suffer with them and for them, and of all the parables recorded in all the Gospels and all the stories that we are so familiar with; there is only one place, this parable, where one of the characters has a name. The prodigal son doesn't have a name. The woman who is looking for the missing coin doesn't have a name. The dishonest steward from last week doesn't have a name. But one person in this parable has it, and it is not the rich man. It's the one who's homeless and hungry and covered with sores. Invisible to everyone else, he has a name, he's known by God. His name is Lazarus, which means, coincidentally, "God helps". The reality of the nearness of God and the mercy of God to someone like Lazarus is intended by Jesus to open our eyes. For what purpose? What do we see when we begin to see?

Nora Gallagher in recounting that Bible study class suggests this: "In our midst was a man, without a blanket and with shoes too large for his feet. We've organized our lives so that he is hidden from us. He lives like God in invisibility. But when we begin to see him, when we see him, I think, we keep a rendezvous. In the seeing is a glimpse, a foretaste of the kingdom of God, and it will be a place where everyone is seen. Including us. We are here together, learning how to see."

When you and I finally see the Lazarus at our gate, and when we see the Lord in our midst, know then that we are being made ready. Ready to take what we have and share it. Ready to stand with the poor and the needy. And ready to imitate the love and the mercy that has come near, so near, to us all. Amen.