

With Open Eyes

Time after Pentecost
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

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

“Now I lay me down to sleep,” the little boy prayed. He had just had a warm bath, followed by a big hug and a story and now his father knelt at his bedside, tucking him in and listened to him pray. It’s a prayer I bet that many of us have prayed. “Now I lay me down to sleep”; how many of you have prayed that? So the little boy set out “Now I lay me down to sleep I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.” But this particular night, he got the words mixed up as kids often do and this is what he prayed: “Now I lay me down to sleep I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should wake before I die. . . .” Then he stopped, was embarrassed and apologized to his father, “Daddy, I just got it all mixed up.” But his father stopped dead in his tracks, or I should say dead on his knees, right, and thought about what his little boy had just said. “If I should wake before I die. . . .” and suddenly his father was struck with a profound thought. A profound realization and he said to his son, “No son, you haven’t mixed the words at all. I think, I think you might have prayed the way the prayer ought to have been prayed all along.”

It’s a curious notion isn’t it? But you know what, I think that’s what the gospel that Kathy read is trying to get at. You see it’s possible to miss the really essential things in life, not because we intend to, but simply because we’re distracted, or preoccupied, or focused on other things. You see the gospel tries to wake us up to two realities. First, that we can fail to see the world around us because we are so absorbed and preoccupied with our own lives and fortune. And, secondly, that as a result of that absorption and preoccupation we miss what God has offered us to alert us to the real living as His people in the community and in the world in which we live. So, I want you to take a deep breath, let it out slowly, just be comfortable, relax, sit back and let’s explore what this gospel’s saying. If you first read it very quickly I think it seems as though the gospel is a tale about the evils of wealth and material possessions, a condemnation of people with wealth, and a call for the wealthy to abandon all their possessions for the sake of the poor.

And while that, indeed, seems to be the point of the story if that is all we see in it could it be that we have been blinded to what it’s really telling us. Central to the story is a promise God makes, it’s made over and over again in both the old and new testament. It’s simply this that there will be a great reversal at the end time of social status and economic scale. Why every time there’s a church supper here I hear people saying it when they’re being asked to take a place in the queue. The first shall be last and the last shall be first, meaning the first have to be careful of the size of the helping they take whereas if you are the last in the line you can take as much as you like because there is nobody behind, right? The rich and the powerful, who in this life see no need for divine grace, actually find themselves cut off from God. That’s what you get when you think you can do everything for yourself. And we don’t even give God elbow room in our lives and in our decision making, we’re just off doing it for ourselves. While the poor, the lowly, and the outcast only have God to hope in because there’s nothing else for them. The great reversal is that those places get switched. Those people have their places switched, and when you read this gospel that’s what you’ve got, a vivid portrayal. Here we have then what happens to the rich man and the poor man. The signs of lavish wealth the rich man enjoys are evident in his fine purple clothes and his sumptuous daily feasts.

You'll notice that the rich man doesn't abuse the poor man; he doesn't show signs of arrogance over the poor. He simply doesn't see him. He simply can't see Lazarus languishing at his gate. The Lazarus we see when we listen to the description is pretty gross. He's not well dressed, he is in rags. He's very poor, he's very hungry, he has sores all over his body and the dogs are licking them. Why such a gross description? Because not only does it portray a poor person, but it portrays a person who is unclean, and who's therefore a total outcast and is not allowed to participate either in the activities of the synagogue in this town or to be part of the social picture. He is shunned, he's one of those people we want nothing to do with, a complete reject from the community in which he lived and the society of his time. And you and I can make up a list of rejects as long as our arm. The church continues to make them.

The rich man isn't harshly condemned for his oversight. He's not even accused of a terrible crime against Lazarus. Nothing about his wealth makes him guilty and it's not that there is something inherently evil about having money. He didn't persecute Lazarus, he didn't deliberately refuse him food, and he didn't take any action to have Lazarus dragged away from his gate. The downside for the rich man is the fact that his wealth acted like a vast curtain drawn around his life so that he is unable to see the beggar at his gate. He just can't see them.

It's only after death that a great reversal in fortunes becomes evident. The rich man is buried and ends up in the tormenting confines of Hades. You notice there is no devil mentioned here. It's just that Lazarus is dispatched to the torment of Hades. The kingdom of the real dead. Finally freed from his wealth and possessions which had obscured his vision, now the rich man sees Lazarus for the first time. And lo and behold, there, across this vast abyss Lazarus is secure in the company of Abraham and he's not suffering at all. And it is here that the truth of the great reversal is revealed, the rich man who had been showered with blessings ends up in Hades, while Lazarus who suffered all sorts of evil ends up with Abraham.

Sadly, the rich man still can't see Lazarus clearly. The rich man sees him only as a potential servant who could bring him some cool revitalizing thirst quenching water. But Abraham points out to him that the abyss between the two, the chasm that exists between them cannot be crossed one way or the other, and the rich man must do without water. Undeterred, and still unable to see the reality, the rich man then sees Lazarus as a message boy, a servant, and says to Abraham let Lazarus to return to the world of the living so that my brothers, five of them, might be warned against the dangers of possessions and wealth blinding them to the realities of living as people of God. Again Abraham refuses the request reminding the rich man of the instruction in scriptures which calls for those whose possessions and wealth are beyond what is necessary for their own survival are responsible for the well being of the poor.

If the brothers, like the rich man, paid no heed to the scriptures Abraham says, and they did not observe the God given responsibilities then they would likely pay no heed to a messenger from the dead. And it is in that harsh reality that the story reaches its conclusion. But that leaves us in a real bind, doesn't it? At least I think it does. None of us are lavishly wealthy, some of us are just getting by, some of us financially and materially ok, and some of us are what we would call comfortable. But mansions, lavish wardrobes, designer clothes and magnificent daily feasts, it isn't us, is it? I don't think so, it's just not us. And, while all of us have probably experienced times when money and possessions are temporarily lacking, and times when we had to pinch the penny and mind the purse, none of us, none of us is reduced to the squalor of living on the street begging for scraps from anybody who goes by.

So how are we to relate to a story like this? For me, and I guess for you, the most straightforward link we have is to the rich man's brothers. They hear the story and they are still around and they can think and act on the meaning of this story. After all we have what Abraham says is necessary. We still have the opportunity to learn and be instructed by the scriptures so that we can see if you will the beggar by the gate. In other words, God can open our eyes for us.

If that is the case, then the story becomes a word to the rich man's brothers and sisters, to us, a warning and encouragement so that we might not join the rich man in his plight. While great wealth and a surplus of possessions don't particularly blind us, we might well ask ourselves are there other things in our lives and living that are preventing us from seeing where we might put our discipleship into action. Is there something in our life getting in the way of our giving to God? Is there something in our life that is holding us back from the type of stewardship to which Jim and his committee are calling us?

When we look at that question, then maybe, just maybe we'll begin to see ways to put our discipleship into action. Then perhaps, we will be like the Shepherd in the highlands of Scotland who came across a botanist working out in the field. The botanist was stopped over a microscope peering down the barrel and the shepherd was very curious to know what he was doing. The botanist when he was asked said he was studying the heather bell, it's a common flower in the Highlands, you find it everywhere growing in the wild. Instead of explaining the study that he was doing, the botanist invited the shepherd to look through the microscope and observe for himself. Peering down into the microscope the shepherd saw, for the first time the wonder and the glory of this oh so common flower. He was washed away with the splendor he saw. He drew in his breath with a gasp and exclaimed, "Good Lord, and I've been trampling on them all my life!"

May God's grace so open our eyes that we might behold the wonder of God's world and allow him to reveal to us our mission and ministry, our stewardship for his love for which we have been so lovingly called.

Amen.