

*With Open Eyes*

Time after Pentecost  
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

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

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

“Now I lay me down to sleep,” the little boy prayed. He had just had a warm bath, followed by a story and a big hug, and there was his father kneeling by the bed, tucking him in and listening to him pray. It was a prayer that many of us prayed when we were young. Do you remember praying it? “Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray the Lord my soul to keep” . . . I don’t see many hands out there! . . . “Guard and love me through the night”, did I pray that right?

On this night, however, the little boy got his words mixed up and he prayed, “If I should wake before I die. . .” Then he stopped, red with embarrassment, and apologized, “Oh Daddy, I got things all mixed up!” His father had been very attentive to his son’s prayer and thought for a moment, and then he said, “Son, I don’t think you’re mixed up at all. In fact, I wonder if that’s not the first time someone has prayed that prayer properly, that we would wake before we die.”

What a curious notion! And yet, isn’t that what the gospel is getting at this morning? You see, it’s entirely possible that we miss the essential things in our life of faith because we’re not alert, our eyes are shut, and we just don’t notice them. The gospel alerts us to two realities: First, that we fail to see the world around us because we are so absorbed in and preoccupied with our own lives and fortunes. And second, as a result of our absorption and preoccupation, we miss what God has offered us to alert us to our calling as His stewards, as His disciples, living as His people in the community and in the world.

Well then, let’s explore what it is that the gospel is attempting to tell us. At first reading, it seems as though the gospel is a tale about the evils of wealth and material possessions, a condemnation of people of wealth and a call for the wealthy to abandon their wealth for the sake of the poor, and that the poor need only rely on the wealthy to take care of their every need. And while that indeed seems to be the point of the story, if that’s all we see in it, could it be that we’ve been blinded to what the story is really all about?

Let’s look at that tale a little more carefully. Central to the story is the promise God makes that when we finally enter the kingdom of Heaven there will be a great reversal of social status and economic scale. The rich and the powerful who in this life perceive no need of divine grace are cut off from the people of God, while the poor, the lowly, the outcast, the rejects who have nothing to rely on other than God are given pride of place in the community of the faithful. What is it? The first shall be last and the last shall be first? This great reversal is vividly portrayed in this morning’s gospel which draws a very sharp contrast between the rich man and the poor man. The signs of the lavish wealth that the rich man enjoys are evident in his fine clothes and his sumptuous daily feasts. Now you’ll notice that the rich man doesn’t abuse the

poor man, nor does he show any signs of arrogance towards the poor man. He simply doesn't see Lazarus who, languishing at his gate, is described in the grossest of terms as being covered in sores and licked by the dogs. We might not hear it, but people in Jesus' time listening to that description would note the full enormity of the position of Lazarus because he's described not only as poor, but also as unclean, a condition which identified him as a social and religious outcast, a reject; why would anybody pay any attention to him? Lazarus is completed as a complete reject from the community in which he lived and the society of his time.

The rich man is not harshly condemned for his oversight. He is not accused of some terrible crime against Lazarus simply because of his wealth. Nor is he indicted because there is something inherently evil about money. He did not persecute Lazarus, he did not refuse him food, and he didn't have the authorities remove Lazarus from his gate. The downside for the rich man is the fact that his wealth has acted like a vast curtain drawn around his life so that he just doesn't see the beggar at his gate. The difficulty was that the rich man just didn't see the poor wretch at this gate.

It's only after death that a great reversal of fortunes becomes evident. The rich man is buried and ends up in the tormenting confines of Hades. Finally freed from his wealth and possessions which had obscured his vision like some vast curtain, the rich man sees Lazarus for the first time and lo and behold, there across a vast abyss having been carried there by angels, Lazarus is secure in the company of Abraham.

And it is here that the truth of the great reversal is revealed. The rich man who had been showered with blessings and who took care of everything for himself, leaving no room for God in his life, ends up in Hades. While Lazarus, who suffered all sorts of evil and only has God to rely on, ends up with Abraham.

Sadly, the rich man still is not able to see Lazarus for the child of God that he really is. He sees Lazarus as a servant, someone to bring him thirst quenching, revitalizing, cool water. But Abraham points out to him that the abyss between them is so great Lazarus cannot bring water to him. Undeterred and still unable to see the reality, the rich man now sees Lazarus as a possible message boy, a servant, and requests that Abraham allow Lazarus to return to the world of the living that the rich man's siblings might be warned against the dangers of possessions and wealth blinding them to the realities of living as the people of God. Again Abraham refuses the request, reminding the rich man of the instruction in scriptures which calls 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 and their God-given responsibilities, then they would likely pay no heed to a messenger from the dead. It's in this harsh reality that the story reaches its conclusion.

The problem for us is that we find those characters difficult to relate to, either the rich man or Lazarus. None of us are lavishly wealthy; some of us are just getting by; some of us are financially and materially okay; and some of us are comfortable. But mansions, lavish wardrobes, designer clothes for every occasion and magnificent daily feasts? Well unless I've got it wrong folks, it just isn't us. And while all of us have probably experienced times when money and possessions were temporarily lacking, and times when we had to pinch our pennies

and mind the purse, none of us has been reduced to the squalor of living on the streets and begging for scraps of food.

So to whom in this tale can we relate? For me, and I guess for you, the most straight-forward link we have is to the rich man's brothers. After all, we have what Abraham cites as necessary, we still have the opportunity to learn from and be instructed by the scriptures so that we can see the mission and ministry to which we are called, so that we can see our stewardship, so that we can see the beggar by the gates. If that's the case, then the story becomes a word to the rich man's brothers and sisters, to us, as a warning so that we might not end up in the rich man's plight. While great wealth and surplus of possessions don't particularly blind us, we might well ask ourselves, Are there things in our lives and living that wrap around us like that curtain, preventing us from seeing where we might put our discipleship into action? Are we so intent in taking care of ourselves and managing our affairs that we've left no room for God in our lives?

Then perhaps, just perhaps, we'll be like the shepherd in the Highland of Scotland who came across a botanist workings in the fields. The botanist was peering into a microscope, and the shepherd became increasingly curious about what this man was doing. He went up and asked the botanist what was going on, and the botanist said he was studying the heather bell, a common little flower that grows wild all over the Highlands. Instead of explaining about the study he was doing and the science and so forth, the botanist invited the shepherd to look through the microscope and to see for himself. Peering down the barrel of the microscope, the shepherd saw for the first time, the wonder and the glory of this so common flower. It was so great and so surprising and so wonderful, that the shepherd drew in his breath and exclaimed, "Good Lord! And I've been trampling on these all my life!"

May God's grace so open our eyes that we may behold the wonder of God's world and have revealed to us the mission and ministry to which we as His stewards have been so lovingly called.

Amen.