

October 7, 2018
World Communion (Leonia PCUSA)

THE COST OF NOT PAYING ATTENTION
Rev. Dr. Gloria J. Tate

Amos 5:14-15 and 21-24 and Luke 16:19-31

“I used to think I was poor,” says one comedian. “Then they told me I wasn’t poor, I was **needy**. Then they told me it was self-defeating to think of myself as needy. I was **deprived**. (Oh, not deprived but rather **underprivileged**.) Then they told me that underprivileged was overused. I was **disadvantaged**.”

“I still don’t have a dime,” this comedian concludes, “But I have a great vocabulary.” Maybe that comedian was laughing to keep from crying, because whatever you may call it, **being poor isn’t any fun!** So, we discover from this morning’s scripture lesson. Today we have a parable and an important lesson.

“There was a rich man,” said Jesus, “**who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.**

“**The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was in torment, the rich man looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’**

“But Abraham replied, ‘**Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony . . .**’”

If there ever was a parable of Jesus that should keep us awake at night, it is the story of the rich man and Lazarus. **Why? Because, compared to most of the people in the world, we are quite rich.** That is why most of us would prefer not to think too much about this parable.

“**We’re saved by grace, not by works,**” we rationalize to ourselves, so we skip over this parable and other teachings of Jesus much like it concerning our responsibility to the disadvantaged of our world.

Indeed, we are very much like the rich man in our ability to see only those teachings of the Master that we want to see.

Bible teacher William Barclay titles this passage, “The Punishment of the Man Who Never Noticed.” *That’s us!* We don’t notice much, until it smacks us dead in the face. How many times have you seen people crossing a street, so engrossed in their cell phone conversation that they don’t notice the cars turning left into the intersection or the blinking red hand telling them to stop or wait? A man in California had his head down texting while a bear was loose in his neighborhood. Lo and behold as he was coming down the steps the bear was coming up! You should have seen him run.

More than 1200 accidents and injuries are related to people who are so busy texting while walking that they didn’t notice the pole that they walked into; or the hole in the sidewalk that they fell into; or the wall that they crashed into; or the **fountain** in the mall that they fell into; or the staircase that they went tumbling down. One man was so busy texting that he walked off the train platform and fell on the tracks. So the emergency room is full of people who have injured themselves while not paying attention.

How many of you have found yourself in trouble, maybe even given the silent treatment for a while because your significant other was trying to tell you something and you were so preoccupied with something else that you weren’t paying attention to what was being said to you?

The saddest thing I encountered, when I was a Chaplain in a juvenile detention center, was a family where the mother **never noticed** that someone was sleeping in her 15-year old daughter’s bedroom on a regular basis. Mother would come in from work and go straight to her bedroom and never knew what was happening under her own roof. She never investigated the hole that appeared in the bathroom wall just

about where her daughter's head would have been if somebody had taken a punch at her. (Which is exactly what the 19- year old boyfriend did.)

Well, Jesus is addressing the cost of not paying attention to the world around us. How many of us have ever noticed how often Jesus talked about **our responsibilities** to the poor and the down-trodden?

"For I was hungry," the Son of Man will say on the Last Day, "**and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.**

"They also will answer, '**Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?**'

"He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me'" (Matthew 25:42-45).

This passage, too, we might call, "**The punishment of the people who never noticed.**" "Lord, WHEN DID WE SEE YOU hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison . . ." And that is the problem. Jesus was there in a person who was hurting, and we didn't even notice.

How many of us ever really notice the problems that plague our society?

The rich man in this parable, of course, is not alone, or Jesus would not have told this story. All over the world in every generation, those who have much in terms of the world's goods turn a blind eye to those who have practically nothing. Many of us who follow Jesus close our eyes and refuse to even acknowledge the problem. Like the rich man in Jesus' parable WE are the people who refuse to notice.

How else could we live with ourselves if we ever really paid attention?

It's amazing to what lengths societies will go..... to not notice. In our country we try to separate the rich from the poor with tactics like gentrification. Throughout this country in the mid-20th century they called it Housing Projects. (There were a number of great experiments *and failures* in drawing a dividing line---Techwood Homes in Atlanta-- St. Louis: Pruitt-Igoe; Chicago: Robert B. Taylor Homes and Cabrini Green; there was Brewster Projects in Detroit and Lafayette Court in Baltimore. You had similar great failures also in Versailles, Italy and Toronto, Canada.)

Brazil is a country with an even wider gap than the U.S. between the haves and the have-nots. I read that a few years ago, in Sao Paulo, Brazil, police stopped seeking to remove beggars and other unsavory people from their streets. They decided rather to concentrate on geographical containment of the problem. They sought to wall off the poor from the rest of the population. The city's rich have literally risen above it all by using helicopters to bypass poorer areas. At one point there were 240 helicopter landing pads in that Brazilian city compared to just ten in the city of New York. (3)

Now part of the justification that's given for this flood of helicopters is that traffic jams often stretch to more than 130 miles.

Faced with increasingly chaotic roads, possible encounters with the poor and homeless..... more and more business people, bankers and the wealthy are taking to the air, I guess that's one way to ignore the problems of the have-nots. That is one way not to notice. Get a helicopter and fly over it all!

The rich man in our story would probably have bought himself a helicopter if they had been available back then. He probably settled for a gilded carriage with thick curtains so he would not have to look at Lazarus lying there helplessly at his gate.

Notice that Jesus said in his parable that Lazarus "was laid" at the rich man's gate. He didn't walk there or drive there. He was an invalid who had to be **laid** there. Lazarus was totally helpless. There were no welfare programs. He obviously had no family to care for him. All he could do was beg, but the rich man couldn't be bothered even to share a few coins. He refused to even acknowledge Lazarus' existence. He was the man who refused to notice.

But, there was one who did notice. God noticed. Luke tells us that the time came when Lazarus died. And what happened then? Jesus tells us, "*The angels carried Lazarus to Abraham's side.*" What a beautiful image. This time it wasn't friends or concerned neighbors who carried Lazarus home at the end of a long day of begging. It was the angels. God knew Lazarus' situation. God cared about Lazarus.

One could be tempted to call this parable, "*The man who made a name for himself, and the man who did not.*" That would have made a nice twist on the parable. It would demonstrate how differently we see the world from the way God sees the world. For you see, in Jesus' story it is Lazarus who made a name for himself. It is the rich man who is anonymous. The rich man is sometimes called Dives. (**Di-vez**) Dives

simply means “rich man.” Now, we **know** Lazarus’ name, but **not** the name of the man who ignored him.

Jesus identified Lazarus; Lazarus was named. That is significant. When giving a parable, Jesus never named a character--not even once. The rich man was nameless, but Lazarus was named. The difference is ever so big. It is the difference between being known and honored by God and **not** being known or honored. Lazarus knew God and was known by God. His very name, Lazarus, means God is my Help or Helper.

“By naming Lazarus and not the rich man, Jesus’ story completely contrasts with worldly understandings of who’s who,” says one writer. (Sarah K. Bunge) “As was his style, Jesus reminds us that heaven is **the opposite** of this world, in many respects, especially when it comes to rating an individual’s worth in society.”

God noticed Lazarus and cared about him.

God also noticed the actions of the rich man who refused to notice the poor man at his gate.

Luke tells us, “The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was in torment, the rich man looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’”

“But Abraham replied, ‘*Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony . . .*’”

Why do you suppose the rich man was in Hades? It was because God noticed him as well. But why did God deal with him so harshly? There is no record of a vicious, glaring sin; no record of a vulgar, public sin. He was not cruel, as far as we know. He never ordered Lazarus from his gate or refused Lazarus the crumbs from his table. He was not a tyrant; not an oppressor of the poor, not a monstrous member of society. Rather, he may well have been a **socially responsible, upright citizen**, respected and well liked. No earthly court would ever think of arresting or condemning him. In society’s eyes he was honored and highly esteemed. People liked him and spoke well of him. What then was his sin? **It was the sin of not noticing.**

How often do you and I take time to notice the people around us--their needs, their concerns? Not just the homeless people asking for handouts on a city street, but the lonely teenager who lives down the street or the young mother trying to keep her family together after her husband has abandoned her. How often do we notice the elderly person whom no one visits; the neighbor who often appears with unexplained bruises, the jobless guy who is being left behind by a culture that no longer values his talents? How often do we notice the person sitting just a short distance from us in the congregation who has just received a devastating report from a doctor? Do we even notice what other people around us are going through?

It is a sin that afflicts all of us to one degree or another, and yet we rarely talk about it. It is the sin of self-absorption. It is the sin of being so preoccupied with our own cares and concerns that we give no thought to the problems of those around us.

But the other failure that Jesus lifts up, is that some may see the chasm, the gap, that exist between US and THEM, BUT FAIL TO ACT. Why? because we’re waiting for that mysterious “**somebody**” to do what needs to be done. We find ourselves so often waiting.

Why didn’t he/she/they *do* something about it! What were **they** thinking!/? Why did that parent turn their back, if only for a second, and allow their child to wander away? How could that friend not see such obvious signs of depression? How could that co-worker not know that man was capable of violence? How could the neighbors not hear the arguing and fighting in a particular house where the spouse or children always seem to be covered with scars and bruises? How could a whole community not see that a large number of children in the neighborhood school appear to be struggling academically.

Why doesn’t he/she/they *do* something about it **They** just kept acting like everything was fine. How could any of **them** not see there was extreme need right in front of their faces? We’re busy asking, how could they, when the question is really, how could **WE**? How could we walk by cold, hungry, disheveled homeless folks on the street, faces turned slightly away, and not *do* something? **How could WE ignore a neighbor who is in distress? Why indeed?**

- Maybe it was because we didn’t know **what to** do.
- Maybe because... we had so much going on in our own lives that we felt overwhelmed.
- Maybe because anything we could do or did do would only be a drop in the bucket compared to what needs to be done.

- Because.... there are others who have **MORE** responsibility for any particular need than we do.
- Maybe because we feel people pretty much get what they deserve in life.
- Because we were too preoccupied with our own relationship to God to see the heart of God in the face of others.
- Because.... there may be just **too much** of a divide between us and those desperately needing our attention.

How could WE ignore a neighbor who is in distress? **Maybe all of the above.**

A chasm has been fixed. The rich man, suffering in the flames of Hades, asks the Lord to send Lazarus to quench his thirst. But it **cannot** be done, because there is this chasm that cannot be bridged. “ This chasm comes as the result of the rich man, over the years, turning a blind eye to Lazarus... of avoiding relationship with him and others like him....this chasm comes, as the result of preoccupation with self, the result of always seeking to spend time with people “*like him*” rather than with those in different circumstances, the result of focus on his own material world, comfort and security. If he has created this divide---would we be hypocrites to criticize him, since he may not be much different than you or me?

We in American culture, with our gated communities, separated neighborhoods according to economic status, education or race or origin; we with our propensity to leave it to government or nonprofit agencies to reach out across the chasm to aid those in need; we, **Jesus teaches**, are building chasms that eventually become too deep to bridge, either by those in need or by us. We simply no longer see Lazarus at the gate.

So, what not only will open our eyes but can motivate us to act as well? Maybe when we experience compassion it transforms us to try to “pay it forward.”

For example, like in the story of Jack Casey. Something happened to Jack when he was a child that changed his life. Jack needed to have surgery and was terrified. He didn’t get any TLC from his family. but there was a nurse who remained by his side, holding his hand, reassuring him that everything would be okay. “*I’ll be right here, no matter what,*” she told him. And she kept her word; she was there and greeted him with a smile the moment he opened his eyes.

Years later, Jack became a paramedic and he was called to the scene of an accident. A man was pinned upside down in his pickup. Jack did his best to free the trapped man even as gasoline dripped down on them. The man was afraid that he was going to die as the rescuers worked to free him. One spark and the whole scene would go up in flames.

Jack remembered back to that time when he was a child and the nurse who never left. He took the man’s hands and squeezed them as he said, “*Don’t worry! I’m right here with you! I’m not going anywhere!*”

Days after the rescue, the two men embraced as the driver said to Jack, “You know, *you were crazy* to stay there with me. We **both** could’ve died.”

Jack smiled. “**I just couldn’t leave you,**” Jack said. (5)

Here is the point of today’s message. There was a time, spiritually, when each of us was a beggar lying at the gate totally helpless, and Christ noticed us and Christ loved us just as we are. As we remember that truth, that compassion, that grace, Christ calls us to look around and see someone who needs **our** attention, **our** compassion, our love. And what the research shows is that this person might just **remember our** generous attention when he or she is in the position to help someone else. If they “pay it forward” that original act of kindness and love is extended perhaps forever. But you can’t be part of this chain of love if you never take time to look beyond you own cares and concerns. Don’t be like the rich man who will forever be remembered as the person who refused to notice and had to pay the cost of not paying attention. Look around you today....may we, in gratitude, respond to all humanity with the care and mercy God has given to us. May we exercise any power and privilege **we have** to respond to the plight of those in positions of powerlessness or pain or hopelessness.....**we will see where we are needed if we simply keep our eyes open and pay attention.**

3. Richard Watson, *Future Files: A Brief History of the Next 50 Years* (Boston: Nicholas Breasley Publishing, 2010).

4. <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Proper+21%3A+September+26,+2004.-a0120526513>.

5. The Rev. Dr. Thomas G. Long, http://day1.org/1051-meeting_the_good_samaritan.