

“Train Our Senses”

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Amos 6:1a, 4-7

Luke 16:19-31

We all know Lazarus. Lazarus is the guy whose clothes smell, camped outside your office building, cardboard sign and tin can at his feet, pleading at us with us on our way to work. Lazarus is the young mother carrying a toddler on her hip, walking up and down the subway car, a haunted look on her face as she asks if anyone can spare a dollar. Lazarus is the transgender kid who no longer has a home because if they cannot fit into a gender box, then their parents say, there is no place for them in their home or family. So they walk the streets, doing what they must in order to have something to eat or a place to sleep and trying each day to choose life instead of death. But on some days, life, for Lazarus, is a real struggle.

We all know Lazarus. Perhaps in your mind right now you are pulling up the Lazarus you have noticed in your life most recently. Maybe you will even see him tomorrow.

We all know Lazarus... but do we really? The truth is, especially if you go to New York City on a regular basis, you probably have some pretty good skills at *not seeing* Lazarus. Sure, you are aware of him in your peripheral vision, but you know that if your eyes meet his eyes, then something might happen. You will be forced to engage. And if you engage so far as to offer a dollar, Lazarus might find you every day, and there goes your coffee money. Or maybe a whole army of Lazarus will start to swarm you, like ducks in a pond that realize you're dropping bread. Giving to Lazarus may seem uncomfortable, inconvenient, and downright scary. And so, you have perfected that blank stare, seeing but not really seeing, so that you can efficiently get to your own destination, achieve your own goals. I know this to be true, because I have done it myself.

And to be honest, that is not a bad strategy. After all, who knows what will happen to your good money once Lazarus gets his hands on it? How can you know if Lazarus really wants to buy food, or is just looking to buy a hit to get high? You wouldn't want to waste your good money to support an addiction. And so, on one day you avert your eyes and focus on something else; but after enough days of doing that, you become blind and can no longer even see Lazarus.

When I studied abroad in Beijing during college, I was surprised and impressed upon my arrival that there were no homeless people. There were no street people begging, as I had seen in every other major city I had seen in the world. "Maybe there is something to this government; maybe they really do take care of their citizens," I thought to myself. It just so happened that a major UN Conference was being held in Beijing that fall, and it was several weeks long. The week after the conference, all of the sudden there were beggars on all the major street corners. I'm not sure what the Chinese government did with these poor folks to erase them from the global eye, but they are not alone in this approach. I lived in Atlanta during the 1996 Olympics. In the year preceding the Olympics, the city tore down a major housing project, and in its place built an enormous jail. They passed city ordinances that made it illegal to lie down on park benches. The result is that the jails filled with the homeless poor so that Atlanta and its international visitors could be blind to the poverty that exists there.

That is what happened to the rich man, I suspect. He became blind to Lazarus, even as his own senses for the finer things in life increased: the rich color of the purple cloth he wore, the light coolness of the linen fabric that covered his skin and kept the sun off of it, even as these clothes allowed the breeze to breathe through the clothes and keep him from sweating. I imagine his senses as he feasted: the honey-dipped breads, the aromatic meats, the finest wines.

The scriptures describe what Lazarus sensed too: his hunger, his sores. Can you feel the rumble in his stomach? The dry roof of his thirsty mouth, the swallow in his dry throat? Can you feel the burning of his sores, the flies that probably swarmed around him, the dogs, licking his sores-- did that make them cleaner, or infect him more, I wonder?

Maybe it hurt too much for The rich man to wonder. I know many of you who have told me you just quit watching the news, because seeing the suffering out there, the problems in the world, is just too hard. There have been times when I have needed to take a break from the news too, for my own sanity. It is human nature to only see or hear that which serves us and satisfies our senses. But the risk of doing that is that what one day seemed heart-breaking becomes normal, because we have shut our eyes and closed our hearts to it.

But God sees differently. Who really sees Lazarus? Who really knows Lazarus? God knows Lazarus. Jesus knows Lazarus. And Jesus wants us to know Lazarus too.

Jesus wants us to train our senses, so that we can see Lazarus, so that we can hear and listen to Lazarus, and find that our well-being is tied up with Lazarus' well-being.

If we look back at our message this morning from the prophet Amos, we see something any of us would enjoy. It is a feast of the senses: relaxing bed; great food; wonderful music; good wine; relaxing oils. None of these things are intrinsically bad. In fact, when I am in times of high stress, I purposely try to do some of these things as acts of self-care: sleep well, eat well, maybe even get a massage.

I don't think Amos is saying these actions on their own are bad. It would be one thing to lounge around on our luxurious couches, and enjoy roasted meats made especially for us, drink wine from bowls, and hum along to harps played around us while getting massaged with the finest, most fragrant oils. But to do that, and not grieve the ruin of Joseph-- well, that behavior only foreshadows the destruction of a nation. In other words, to enjoy leisure and wealth without awareness of and concern for the suffering is what troubles God, and causes trouble for our communities.

Here are some things we should be aware of: even though unemployment is low, the gap between rich and poor in America is wider than it has ever been in the 50 years since the US Census started tracking income. This gap actually costs lives. According to the New York Times, "almost three-quarters of rich Americans who were in their 50's and 60's in 1992 were still alive in 2014. Just over half of poor Americans in their 50's and 60's in 1992 made it to 2014." With the Federal Minimum Wage stagnant at \$7.25 for the last 10 years, that means that even though unemployment is low, people are working at jobs that cannot sustain a life or a family. Think about the value in rent or sale price of the kind of home where you live. Has it stayed the same in 10 years? Certainly not, and I tell you when there have been times when I have inquired about affordable housing in this community, whether for women who are ready to leave the Oelhaf House shelter, or for aging seniors of our own church, I have learned that the waiting list for Section 8 housing is 2 years long.

Jesus not only sees Lazarus; Jesus also knows Lazarus' name.

It's a stunning reversal; we expect the rich man to be known, to have made a *name* for himself, and for the beggar covered in sores to be the nameless one. But Jesus, who very rarely names the characters in his parables, goes out of the way to name *Lazarus*, while the rich man not only remains unnamed, but also unknown at heaven's entry. And when the rich man finally does recognize Lazarus, he is still only seeing Lazarus in a way that is meant to serve him. He demands Father Abraham to send Lazarus to dip

his finger in water to cool his tongue, which is in agony due to the flames. Now, the senses are reversed: the rich man, whose tongue once enjoyed luxurious feasts, is now on fire. Here in the end, the rich man finally sees Lazarus— yet only as someone who could serve him. When Lazarus hears from Abraham that it is too late for him, he then begs Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his family members.

But isn't that what Lazarus was already doing, just by lying at the gate? If that did not awaken mercy in the rich man or his family and cause them to listen and see, and if the prophets before Lazarus, like Amos, failed to cause the rich man and his family to listen and see, then what will?

I am not sure what is worse: the sin of not knowing, or the sin of not caring. Here in church, we try to awaken our senses: open our eyes and our ears to see and hear the world as God senses it, but also to awaken our hearts, to care for the world as God cares for it. And once we see, once we hear, once we care, we cannot help but respond.

We could talk about seeing Lazarus, and even passing some dollars or a meal his way. But what would it mean to actually take down the wall that secludes the rich man on one side, where he enjoys his wealth, and Lazarus on the other side, where he is left to the dogs who lick his sores? What would it mean to upset the system that rewards the rich for being rich and punishes the poor?

Until we recognize that Lazarus is not just some guy suffering on the other side of the gate, but that Lazarus represents part of our own humanity, part of us, and part of God, we will not be using our senses the way Jesus challenges us to do.

Sadly, it was too late for the rich man. But Jesus shares this story because it is not too late for us. Let me tell you that I as your preacher find Jesus' words just as challenging as you do. Listen, all you who have ears. We all want to be seen by Jesus. We all want to be welcomed by God. But how we are seen, how we are welcomed by God, may depend on how we see and welcome Lazarus. This is the truth, and challenge, of our faith. May the Spirit lend us help in our understanding, and in our response. Amen.