

“I Want to Be In that Number”
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Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15
Luke 16:19-31

Yesterday, I finally played Pickleball for the first time. My sisters-in-law were in town, with their son, and while my daughter and her cousin rode bikes around Overpeck Park, we wandered into the pickleball courts. Each court had players on it, and they were fully immersed in the game. As we stood and watched, we wondered what the protocol was for people waiting for a court. Should we stand at the gate? Should we wait at the benches on the side of the courts? Should we pick a court and just hover there until the players move on? We waited and waited at the gate, until finally we noticed someone else standing at the fence that separated the courts, one side from another. He seemed to be waiting, too. And so, we asked him: how can you get in on this game? He explained the etiquette: you place your paddle in the fence, and that indicates that you are waiting for a turn to play. “And look!” the man, whose name we learned is Mike, “here’s a court opening up now. Do you need a fourth?” We DID need a fourth, and so the three of us played with Mike, who was the friendliest and most competent teacher—a man who clearly loved the game, and couldn’t wait to share it with others. He was patient even with a newbie like me, his doubles partner, who brought his game down a bit, even as his skill taught me so much.

Long, long ago, in ancient Jerusalem, another kind of waiting happened. There was an etiquette—a kind of unwritten rule, held between the rich and the poor. When a rich person held a feast, by the end of the night they would approach the benches outside the gates of their homes. As custom held, the poor of the neighborhood waited and waited on these benches. It was the obligation of the wealthy to come out and feed the poor waiting on benches, with the excesses of their parties. To not do so brought dishonor on the wealthy household. In a society that associated wealth with virtue, this act of charity was the least a rich person could do.

But the rich man in Jesus’ parable did not even do the *minimum* that was expected of the wealthy. And though wealth often established a name for someone in a community, the gospel doesn’t give him a name in the story. However, to the poor man begging at his gate? The gospel knew his name. Jesus knew it too: Lazarus.

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 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. Maybe Lazarus will show up at church one day, or is even here today.

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 take better care of their citizens than my own home," 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. In the past two weeks, desperate people trying to escape violence and abject poverty, finally making it across the US Border, have been herded and shipped away, like cattle, from states that don't want to see them.

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.

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 setting the table the way that 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. "Oh when the saints, go marching in, Oh when the saints go marching in. Oh Lord I want to be in that number, when the saints go marching in."

The rich man, who was accustomed to buying all that he needed, likely assumed that his wealth could also establish his place among the saints. It didn't. Now, on most days, I am a universalist— I don't believe in a punitive hell, at least not beyond what we create for ourselves here on earth. So this parable digs into me, that God's grace actually costs something.

Whether Abraham calls *us* saints, how we are seen and how we are welcomed by God, depends 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.