

“When Did We See You?”

Valley Presbyterian Church – March 14, 2021

4th Sunday of Lent

Psalm 41:1-7, 11-13

Rev. John Wahl

Luke 16:19-31

The contrasts in this story couldn't be more startling: between a nameless rich man who has the best clothes, and a poor man called Lazarus whose own skin is broken; between the man who feasted luxuriously every day and the man who saw those feasts but starved just outside the gate; between the one who was quietly disposed of, and the one who died and was given a proper and dignified burial.

There was clearly a chasm between these two men, and their experience of the world. They existed in the same sphere, living in the same space, seeing each other through windows or whenever the rich man left his house and had to step over poor Lazarus. They knew each other, but their lives were so different, they might as well have been on different planets. One had more than he knew what to do with and access to anything he could ever want or dream. The other had less than nothing and could only look longingly for mercy from those in his community; mercy that was never forthcoming. Not even a crumb.¹

Once they had both died, the tables turned; but the chasm remained. They could still see each other and speak to one another. The rich man – unnamed by Jesus, but often called Dives; which, in Latin, simply means “wealthy” – was used to getting what he wanted, and saw no reason this time should be any different. He asked Abraham, in whose bosom Lazarus was comfortably resting, to send Lazarus to bring comfort in his distress

But in asking, he betrayed himself: he called for Lazarus by name.

It's easy to imagine that, having lived such incredibly different lives, the rich man might never have even noticed the poor man, or at least avoided looking. It's something that many of us who have spent time in big cities are well-practiced at: looking away, never making eye contact with people in need sitting on the side of

¹ Teri Peterson, “The Rich Man and Lazarus”

the street. We stay safely on our side of the chasm, not wanting to get too involved, imagining we have little in common with “those people.”

But the rich man said, “send Lazarus.” He recognized his face and knew his name. Dives knew the man who sat at his gate, starving and wounded. This means he willfully chose to ignore his suffering. These two lived in the same community and the one decided that the other was not valuable enough to help. He preferred sumptuous meals and purple clothes and didn’t care about anyone else, not even his neighbor who lay at his very gate.

In a sermon on this passage from 1955, Dr. Martin Luther King says,

There is no hint that Dives was condemned because he gained his wealth by dishonest means. There is no implication that being rich was Dive’s crime. He was condemned because his selfishness caused him to lose the capacity to sympathize. There is nothing more tragic than to find a person who can look at anguishing and deplorable circumstances of fellow human beings and not be moved.

Dives’ sin was not that he made this gulf between him and Lazarus; this gulf had come into being through the accidents of circumstance. The sin of Dives was that he felt that the gulf which existed between him and Lazarus was a proper condition of life. Dives felt that this was the way things were to be.²

Dives, the (formerly) rich man, calls out to Abraham from across the gulf, asking for mercy; asking for Lazarus – by name – to come and cool his tongue by dipping his finger in water and placing it in his mouth to alleviate his agony. In death, as in life, the man treats his neighbor as if he is a subordinate, whose purpose is to serve him. Abraham reminds him that in life, he received good things, and Lazarus received evil things, but now the reverse will be true. Lazarus is comforted; the man is in agony.

Even when the chasm that he had created is brought to his attention, the rich man remains undeterred in his sense of entitlement to control Lazarus; asking a second time for Lazarus to be sent away from the comfort he’d never enjoyed in life – and back to the very place where he had suffered – for the benefit of the rich man’s five brother who, for the record, appear to have never cared for Lazarus in life; so it’s not at all clear they would pay attention to him coming back from the dead either.

² Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Impassable Gulf”, Dexter Ave. Baptist Church, Montgomery, AL, 1955.

Abraham's response should give us all pause. He said "they have Moses and the Prophets. They must listen to them."

In other words: we already know what we're supposed to do. The commandments to Love God and Love Neighbor are not novel; they've been there this whole time. That's supposed to be the core of who we are and what we do. What more do we require before we will act on the word of God? What will it take for us to remember God's call, and respond to it?

We all know a Lazarus; for he is our neighbor. Lazarus is the one currently living in hell; it is a hell that may be – in part – of his own doing; but it's a hell that others have had a hand in creating; through injustice or negligence. Maybe, as part of an inequitable society, we have had a hand in creating it, as well. Jesus calls those of us who are not currently living in hell to see Lazarus, not to took away; and, instead, to respond.³

Remember, Jesus told this story to "Pharisees who were lovers of money." (v. 14) As Pharisees, they knew the commandments and the words of the prophets through the ages, calling people to live God's way. And yet their love was out of order. Rather than loving God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength, and loving their neighbor as themselves, they loved money first. Jesus told this story to show them what kind of world that out-of-order love would create.

We know all this, and yet we so often choose not to respond. We know we have created a chasm between us and them, coming up with all sorts of reasons why we can't cross it to love our neighbor. And so, we look away from the poor as we stockpile groceries; we look away while people fleeing poverty, violence or environmental disaster are left to die. We look away from substandard housing in our cities and an opioid addiction crisis in our small towns; we look away as we hear untruths or repeat rumors. And the chasm grows, and grows, and becomes more and more fixed, and it feels impossible to cross.

But, the parable at least hints at a better way. While a fixed chasm separates Lazarus and Dives in death, in life there was only a gate standing between them: a gate that can be opened. The rich man begs for Lazarus to be sent to his brothers and warn them: to tell them to open the gate and share what they have with people in need; to open the gate while there is a gate to open. Lazarus, of course, cannot do this; those still living must listen to the prophets and figure out about the gate

³ Simon Woodman, "Did You See Lazarus?"

for themselves. And we have no idea if that happens. We are not told the outcome of the story of the five brothers.⁴

There is no second chance for the rich man, but there can be for us. In this life, there are gates that can be opened; not gulfs that cannot be crossed. The rich man knew Lazarus; but he did not see the image of God in his neighbor. Or, to be more honest, he chose not to because he loved himself more.

Lent is a time for honest self-reflection; the kind that brings us closer to the truth that will set us free. Choosing to live in way that creates a chasm may feel like freedom, but, in the end, we become trapped on the wrong side; unable to enter into community and find the comfort that God intends for us. But the way of Jesus leads to life – life abundant; a life of sharing, giving, and receiving; life in community; the life eternal that begins now. Amen.

⁴ Joanna Harader, "Forgive My Hat"