

1 Timothy 6:6-19

⁶Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; ⁷for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; ⁸but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. ⁹But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.

¹¹But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. ¹²Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. ¹³In the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you ¹⁴to keep the commandment without spot or blame until the manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁵which he will bring about at the right time-he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords. ¹⁶It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.

¹⁷As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. ¹⁸They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, ¹⁹thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

Luke 16:19-31

¹⁹"There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²²The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.' ²⁵But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. ²⁶Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.' ²⁷He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house-²⁸for I have five brothers-that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.' ²⁹Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.' ³⁰He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' ³¹He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"

Jesus Will See You Now

September 25, 2016

Luke 16: 19-31

I heard about a Sunday School teacher that told his class about the story of the rich man and Lazarus. He highlighted the good end of Lazarus and the bad end of the rich man. He pointed out how one man went to hell and the other man went to heaven. He also pointed out how rich one man was and how poor the other man was. After the teacher taught his lesson he said to the class, "Now which would you rather be, boys, the rich man or

Lazarus?" One boy raised his hand and said, "Well, I'd like to be the rich man while I'm alive, and Lazarus when I'm dead." I think we may all feel that way at times.

This is a remarkable parable and like all parables it has multiple meanings depending on where you are in your faith journey and station in life. It is not meant to be taken literally. It's not really a story about the facts or details of heaven and hell nor is it a condemnation of wealth or a glorification of the poor. But it may be about the chasms that divide us. And wealth may be one of those chasms that puts a barrier, a gate, between us and those in need and often makes us blind to their plight. At heart it is a story about seeing and caring for those who perhaps are poor, but perhaps even more so, it is a story about those whom we choose not to see.

We can easily make people invisible can't we? That ragged person outside the grocery store. That guy with the sign at the intersection that says, "will work for food" or "homeless vet." The dementia patient in the nursing home or the kid at school who is different and always eats alone. I don't know about you but it's happened to me many times while traveling in larger cities, that I come up to a stop light and there, standing on the side of the road, is someone who is asking for money. He or she is possibly homeless, or poor, or looking for some kind of work. In our current culture there are a lot of folks asking for handouts and help along the road. And sometimes it is hard for me to see this. Maybe it is for you as well.

Hard to truly look these folks in the eyes and then drive by with a shrug. Sometimes I don't even look at them. I guess I think that if I don't see them then it's not my problem and someone else can deal with it. But often, and I try to live this way more and more, I try to always look folks in the eye, to try and truly see the others in my life and see the Christ within. I try, but don't always succeed.

I know I've shared this story before but it is one that still haunts me a bit. I was stopping at the grocery store to get something a while back. I remember I was in a hurry and as I was going into the store I was met in the parking lot by a young Hispanic girl who was selling chocolate bars or something like that.

All I saw was that she was Hispanic and trying to sell me something and I brushed by her with a curt "No Thank You." As soon as I got in the store I realized what a fool I had been. I didn't even look at her or acknowledge her. I failed to see. I mean I saw her, but I didn't really see her, if you know what I mean. I treated her the same way the rich man in the story treated Lazarus.

In a reflection on this passage, Lutheran Pastor John Stendahl shared a story about visiting a young man in the hospital who had had a serious brain trauma. The young man was somewhat agitated when he arrived and so they decided to take a walk down the hall and find an empty room to visit.

At the far end of the room were a couple of janitors at work buffing the floor and seeing that there was no one sitting at the tables he said "There's nobody in here so let's visit here." Then from the other side of the room one of the janitors said "what do you mean, nobody? We're not nobody." It was a moment that Stendahl remembers to this day and still makes him feel a sting of shame. Maybe you've done the same thing at some time in your life.

Out of sight, out of mind is one of those old sayings we know. But choosing not to see will not solve the problem for us. Jesus is not going to let us off the hook that easily I'm afraid. Indifference is not going to cut it. You see in Jesus' day there was a great divide between those who had wealth and power and those who were barely surviving. The truth of the matter was that the religious leaders, the temple authorities, the high priest and the families associated with the temple and the Roman authorities were some of the wealthiest people. In

fact, many of them were shrewd and clever business men and politicians having acquired much property and wealth from their own kinsman. Through taxation and other means, they displaced farmers from their lands making them like Jesus, laborers and even slaves.

Let me make clear that they were doing this to their own Jewish brothers and sisters, their own kin and culture, to all those who were children of Abraham. This is who Jesus is telling the parable to. Those who control the temple and the sacrificial system are treating their own people like the rich man treats Lazarus. Get the picture? No wonder they wanted to silence him. They chose not to see. They are guilty of the sin of indifference and what strikes me most about this parable is how closely it resembles the world we live in right now. A world where the chasm between those who have and those who have not, widens each day and indifference is the order of the day.

Just this week in the news we watched John Stumpf CEO of Wells Fargo, get grilled over the company's practice of opening fake checking and credit card accounts in customer's names in order to reach company goals. A practice that ruined the credit ratings of unknowing customers and caused several thousand employees to be fired. But John Stumpf only gained wealth because his stock went up by millions. In the hearing he seemed to be unmoved by the consequences of his actions and I wonder what his response would have been had one of those people whose credit had been destroyed or one of those twelve dollar and hour employees who were fired had been sitting across the table from him. I wonder if he would have gained his spiritual eyesight then. Again, this is not a condemnation of those who have money but of those who think that they are better than others and don't want to see or respond to those they deem beneath them in the social ladder of life.

We don't want to see, and yet, Jesus reminds us in this story that there are eternal consequences and we won't likely get a visit from someone on the other side as Jacob Marley did for Ebenezer Scrooge, reminding us that the chains we forged in life will follow us into eternity. Because we too have Moses and the prophets and more than that, we have the epistles and the Gospels, and we even have One who truly has come back from the dead to remind us of our responsibilities to the poor, the hungry, the orphan, the widow, those in need, all those children of God, all those sons and daughters of Abraham.

And he challenges us to consider how often do you and I take time to notice the needs of people around us? Not just the homeless people asking for handouts on a city street, not just the hungry, 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 jobless guy who is being left behind by a culture that no longer values his talents, or our own children or spouses? 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 about us and I'm as guilty as anyone.

So what are we going to do about it? What are we going to do about it personally and as a church? We are doing some really good things right now and I am so proud of both of these congregations, but what else should we be doing? What else should you be doing? Who is invisible to you and why? And what do you need from the family of God here to help you get beyond that?

Sometimes it does seem so overwhelming and difficult and hopeless but it really isn't. We can do both small and important things to see and respond to those in need. Sometimes it is just about listening and seeing.

Looking people in the eye and giving them your focused love and attention or choosing to walk with them for awhile in their shoes.

At the graveside service for Gay Garland who died of cancer this week, I found myself standing beside a complete stranger. We were all early and waiting around for the minister to arrive. As we stood looking at the beautiful trees and the newly dug grave I noticed tears streaming down her cheeks. This was one of those moments when you think to yourself, "Should I say something? Or should I just pretend I didn't see those tears? After all I don't even know this person." A few years ago I would have pretended not to see any of this but things are different now, so I asked her if she knew Gay very well. "No, she said, but she worked with Michael, Gay's husband" but that wasn't the reason for the tears. "Six years ago my husband died of cancer as well and this is the first time since then that I've been to a funeral." Then the tears came in earnest. Being there brought back all kinds of memories both good and bad. She went on to share that she has felt so alone and isolated for the last six years. She has no immediate family and since she worked on Sundays she didn't have a church family either. In many ways, even though people probably walked past her every day, her pain was invisible to them. Perhaps no one noticed the sadness in her eyes and demeanor, or having noticed it, they didn't want to know.

This encounter was a gift from the Holy Spirit this week particularly in light of our passage today and it has me wondering and dreaming about ways to help all those who have to work on Sundays. What small thing could a little old church like this do to let someone who can't be in church, because they have to work, know that they are connected to the family of God and that they are not alone in this world. It has me thinking.

I hope I let her know that someone was listening and noticing. I hope and pray for her that she will find companions along the way and that she will not live in despair begging for scraps of kindness or attention. I hope that noticing will make a difference. And I hope and pray for myself that I will never be the same. Thanks be to God. Amen.