

A Matter of Understanding

Luke 16:19-31

Do you remember a time when you felt all alone, nobody around to help bring comfort, strength or encouragement, or even physical needs to meet a situation? One such time came for me when my then 9 year old son fell out of a tree while playing in a local wooded area. I saw a couple of his friends shouldering him up the sidewalk toward the house. Sensing something was wrong I ran to meet the boys and took my son the rest of the way to the house. He seemed to be Ok until I heard him ask, "Mom, where does it hurt?" and noticed blood coming out of his ear. Quickly, I rushed him to the local emergency room where they examined him and were just about to release him when he started a series of seizures. After further x-rays they determined that he had a depressed skull fracture and would need surgery. They wheeled him into surgery about 8pm and left me to wait in a cold, empty waiting room. It was during those long hours that I felt the most alone I had ever felt in my life. Once in a while a nurse would come out and see how I was doing, even bringing a blanket and something hot to drink, but for the most part I was completely alone. Passers-by just went their way hardly noticing the lone figure waiting anxiously for any word of hope or encouragement. That word of hope came in the early morning hours when a doctor came and pronounced that the surgery had gone well and my son was in recovery and I would be able to see him shortly. I don't remember many of the details about what happened before and after the surgery, but that long, lonely waiting time is etched forever in my memory.

Lazarus had his time of waiting in loneliness as well. Dumped at the rich man's gate, starving and filled with sores, in a deplorable condition, all he could do was wait for someone to respond. The rich man, inside and well filled with the days delicacies and drink was a stark contrast to Lazarus' condition. Lazarus only wanted the scraps that were thrown away, the pieces of bread that were used to wipe off the rich man's hands. In those times silverware was not used, eating was done with the hands and bread was used to help wipe off food stained hands. That bread was then thrown to the dogs, not deemed fit for human consumption. That's what Lazarus wanted. It would have seemed a good thing to throw the scraps to Lazarus.

But the rich man did not even notice Lazarus' condition and plight. His sole focus was on himself and his seemingly "blessed" condition. In those days being rich was a sign of God's blessing. It was believed by the Pharisees that if one obeyed God's commandments and followed God's ordinances he would receive blessing. Those who sinned and did not follow God would receive punishment. And this would have been the rich man's attitude even if he did notice Lazarus. After all, it was not the rich man's fault that Lazarus had slipped into disfavor with God. So the rich man does nothing!

Then the tables are turned as they often are in Jesus' parables. Lazarus dies and is received into the arms of Abraham, known as a place of extreme bliss. Shortly after the rich man dies as well but he is sent to hell where he lies in torment, just the opposite fate as Lazarus.

Now we don't know much about the character of either the rich man or Lazarus, so Jesus' point is not about how good or bad either man was. It was about How God sees things and how we see things. God sees the injustice of Lazarus' condition when something could be done about it. God also sees that the rich man had the capacity to care for Lazarus, but his sole was so wrapped up in himself and his wealth, that he didn't even notice or care for the man lying at his gate. Yet even in his torment, the rich man still doesn't get it. He still sees Lazarus as servant, as one beneath his status, as one capable of meeting the rich man's needs. It is still all about the rich man.

We have all heard sermons about the evils of wealth and accumulation and our propensity to care more for our status and wealth in life. But this parable is about more than that. It is about the rich man's blindness to Lazarus' condition. The rich man shows no empathy toward Lazarus even when the tables are turned. Lazarus is in a deplorable state when he finds himself at the rich man's gate. The rich man does not command anyone to get rid of him, nor does he in any way treat him poorly. His only reaction that he doesn't react. He shows no empathy or compassion. So, the question we can ask is, how does the rich man's wealth blind him to the plight of Lazarus? And, for our part how does our self-centeredness blind us to the needs of others?

There is no doubt that needs are all around us, not just with hungry, destitute and homeless people, but with those who are going through significant, uprooting changes in life, those who face difficulties beyond their abilities to cope. We see these needs in families, friends, co-workers, faith communities and almost any place we find ourselves. Yet we sometimes are so focused on ourselves and our needs that we blind ourselves to the needs of others. We are tuned into a very narrow range of vision.

I do not believe that God wants us to take care of every need in life in those around us. But God does call us to be aware through our own sense of God's love for others. We are called to compassion for our neighbors, family and friends. We are called to be aware of more than just ourselves. In a very real sense we are called to create an environment of God's love right around us. That means getting outside ourselves enough to sense the disruptions happening to keep that love from being evident. What we tend to do when we ask someone how they are is to immediately dismiss the question we are asking and move on to something else that attracts our attention more than the person we are asking. When we do that we are more likely not to attend to any needs that the other might be expressing. Often we just don't want to know about the other person's problems and we reach the rich man's dilemma. Ignorance is bliss is

what we subconsciously think. Or we have heard the complaint time and time again and don't want to hear it any more. We don't take time to get to the bottom of the complaint, to truly listen in ways that can help us help them. We don't necessarily have to fix the problem but with a few artful questions we can help another get to the heart of their problem so they can see it more clearly.

The world isn't about any one of us, it's about all of us. God made this world to be interactive. But we tend to make it to be about ourselves, our lives, our events, our cares and concerns. We have a great propensity to be the rich man of our times. The Lazarus' are overlooked, until we become Lazarus, until we have to wait in a dark, cold waiting room, stuck in time while the world continues on around us. Sometimes all we need is a sympathetic or empathetic word to keep us going, a morsel of hope from someone else's bright optimism, someone else's word of faith.

We can't see things from God's perspective although we can. We are created with the capacity to see simple needs in others. And we have been given the spirit of compassion, Jesus' spirit of compassion, the spirit that reaches out to those in need. We have been given the spirit of reaching out to others with the gifts and talents God has given us to offer a ray of hope or encouragement or sustenance. It isn't just about feeding the hungry! It's about beginning to know the hunger and listening to the plights of those who are in need. Perhaps it's about setting ourselves aside for a few moments and listening to another with our hearts and minds and sensitivities.