

The Poor Man At The Gate

Texts: Psalm 146; Poverty and Compassion, from Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life, Donald McNeill, Douglas Morrison, Henri Nouwen, p. 68 ; Luke 16: 19-31

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There is a painting in your bulletin, it was painted in 1610 by an anonymous artist, and I want you to have a look at it.

[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Anonymous_-_Rich_man_and_Lazarus_ca._1610.jpg]

It's a magnificent painting, and I want you just to spend a minute to look at it and see what you see. I'm going to ask you a few questions after you've had a chance to look at it. Go on, look at it!

[Wait a minute]

Did you see the kitchen help with the metal basket in her hand? You did? Hard to miss her, right? Good.

How about the lady with the lamb shank she's about to put on a skewer? Got it? Excellent.

Now a little harder: How about the dinner party in the background at the right? Did you notice *six* diners back there? You're really on top of it!

Now for something harder still. Did anyone notice the dog jumping up at bottom left? And if you saw the dog, did you see the cat?

Now one final question. Did anyone notice the poor man sitting at the gate just outside the door?

He's hard to notice amidst all the activity going on in the house for the dinner, but he's there. The painting's title is The Rich Man and Lazarus.

Inside there is an abundance of food, food overflowing its containers, food enough for diners and a well-fed cat and dog. But even in the picture, that food is far, far away from the poor Lazarus just outside the door. There is a vast chasm fixed between him and the food.

And, the composition of the painting implies, in the rich man's world, the poor man Lazarus is nearly invisible.

Things aren't really much different in our time.

I had a great awakening about this when I was in university quite a few years ago now. My dad and I were walking back to the underground parking garage after watching a Blue Jays baseball game. We were chatting along about the game we had just seen when, suddenly, I realized I was talking to myself. I looked back and saw my dad giving money to a homeless man and chatting with him about the game.

I had walked the exact same path as my father, and I hadn't seen the man. He was just invisible to me, but my dad spotted him right away. And now he was having a conversation with him, as well as giving him some money.

On the drive home I asked my dad about his giving and whether he thought the guy might just be ripping him off. He said that even if the guy was trying to rip him off, it didn't matter, because the guy was in pretty desperate shape no matter what. Anyone who would resort to such a scheme must really need the money.

And besides, he said, even if he is trying to rip me off, I'd never want to change places with him.

That was his measure of whether it was right to give or not: would I want to change places with the other person, to have their life and their skills and their brainpower and their connections and their situation.

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Our text today made me think back to that walk with my father, and to that painting of the parable, with Lazarus nearly invisible outside the door.

Jesus forces the invisible poor into our sight when he tells the parable of Lazarus and the Rich man.

As with so many of the parables, we find ourselves irresistibly drawn to identify ourselves with one of the characters. We think, "Who would I be? Who am I in this parable?" Here our choices would seem to be Lazarus, the beggar, or the rich man.

Since in our society according to a recent news report, even a man whose family has an income of over \$400,000 a year doesn't think he's rich, I'm betting that

most of us are going to go with Lazarus by default, even though we are really about as far above Lazarus in wealth as we think the rich man is above us, we're probably going to go with Lazarus.

Now, this is the only parable Jesus told in which a character is given a name, a personal name. It's almost as if Jesus is saying, "Everyone else might walk by the poor, the anonymous poor, but I won't. I know that each poor person has a name and a story, that the poor, too, are made in God's image. They are people, they have names, they matter."

In Jesus' telling, the nameless poor get a name.

But the rich man does not. Perhaps because of our tendency to identify with the poor man, we don't notice this. Perhaps Jesus is saying to the wealthy, "No, it's not about you, it's about a man named Lazarus."

Or perhaps because of our tendency not to think of ourselves as rich, Jesus refuses to name the rich man for that very reason. The rich man receives no name so that he remains an everyman, a person who could, in fact, be anybody, even one of us. Hmmm.

Now, this guy is really rich. He's wearing purple and linen. Purple was the most difficult color to dye in the ancient world. You had to collect thousands of snails from the ocean. The snails had to be boiled for days in a giant vat. The smell was awful. It was all very expensive and was therefore available only to the very rich. It was the sign of wealth and power and the Romans limited who was allowed to wear purple within their empire.

Linen, likewise, was a very expensive fabric. Think Armani suits and Gucci shoes and you've got this guy.

Every day this man banquets with the best food. At these banquets, when your hands got greasy from the fat of the sumptuous fare, you wouldn't use a napkin to wipe them, but rather would reach for some bread, and wipe your fingers off on the bread. Then you would throw the bread under the table.

Later, after the dinner feast, the servants would collect up the bread from under the table and throw it away. This is what Lazarus is hoping to eat. He's waiting outside the rich man's gate to eat his garbage when it is thrown away.

In contrast to this rich guy, we have Lazarus, lying in the street, covered with the open sores that accumulate on the body when it can't wash, starving and longing even for a crumb to eat.

He's so miserable, says Jesus, that even the dogs take pity on him and come out to lick his wounds. The animals see Lazarus where the rich man apparently overlooks him. The inhumanity of the rich man is contrasted to the compassion of his dogs.

The day comes when Lazarus dies and he is taken up to heaven to be in Abraham's bosom. This was a metaphor for paradise. Lazarus was a true child of Abraham and he got to be with that great man of faith in the after life.

That the poor man Lazarus had died wouldn't be at all surprising to the people hearing Jesus' parable. But they would have been surprised by the fact that he ended up in Abraham's bosom enjoying the blessings of God. Indeed, being in Abraham's bosom was regarded by the Jews as the highest bliss, much as we regard having the place of honor at the table in God's banquet as a sign of great blessing.

Like many today, back then people saw wealth as a sign of God's blessing and poverty as a sign of God's curse: they made the equation wealth = virtue, poverty = sinful laziness. Jesus shows that there is no such equation for God, that the equation doesn't balance and is no equation at all.

In passing, we notice that there is no mention of Lazarus being buried. Presumably, while his soul is winged to heaven by the angels, his body is left untended to rot in the street.

If people would have been surprised that Lazarus ended up in Abraham's bosom, they would have been shocked that the rich man he ended up in a place of torment. After all, he got a proper burial, as the text tells us, and would have received the blessings of the rabbis at his graveside.

How is that possible, they would have asked themselves. What has the one to do with the other?

We can be sure that it isn't just about the rich man's wealth, because we know that Abraham himself was a very wealthy man. It must be about something else, about the attitude one has to the wealth one has, and about the attitude one has towards the poor.

Abraham, we might remember, met strangers at his gate with an offer of a meal and hospitality.

Not so our rich man. In life the rich man had done everything to make sure that his life was kept separate from that of poor Lazarus, including the physical separation of a gate, but in death we can see that the fates of these two men, kept so separated in life by the rich man's efforts, are in reality deeply intertwined.

No matter how much the rich man had tried to keep Lazarus out of his life, the reality in God's eyes is that the two are forever bound.

So Jesus has set the stage for us. Now the real action of the parable begins.

The rich man looks up beyond the great chasm that separates his torment from Lazarus's blessing and he cries out, not to Lazarus, but to Abraham.

He's still pretending not to see Lazarus. Or maybe he still really doesn't see him, who knows. Lazarus is the invisible poor. At least, invisible until the rich man needs him, that is. Then suddenly Lazarus appears, then suddenly Lazarus is important.

Then the rich man is perfectly willing to ask Abraham to send Lazarus to dip his finger into some water to cool his tongue in the midst of the flames.

This comment of the rich man is so revealing. It turns out that he *does* know who Lazarus is. He even knows his name! All his pretending all those years when Lazarus lay outside his gate, all his feigning not to see him have been revealed as a sham.

When *Lazarus* was in need, the rich man knew nothing of him, wouldn't let him have even his scraps. But when *the rich man* himself is in need, suddenly he knows all about Lazarus.

Not only that, but his great torment hasn't changed his attitude one bit. He still sees Lazarus as just another person he can use for his own comfort, as someone so clearly inferior that he would be honored to serve the rich man.

The rich man would take Lazarus from the highest bliss and bring him down into hell with him so that he can have a little water. A more vivid picture of selfishness and self-centeredness would be hard to draw.

In the midst of torment for his selfishness during life, the rich man is still utterly selfish.

Abraham intercedes and tells the rich man that Lazarus won't be sent to help him. Besides, even if he wanted to, he couldn't because of the great chasm set up between them.

Abraham himself points out that the chasm is set up as much to prevent the people in heaven from going down to Hades to help out as it is to keep the people in Hades from escaping. It's obvious why the people in Hades would want to cross the chasm, but it's not at all obvious why anyone would want to go the other way.

But that is precisely the difference between the people in heaven and the people in Hades. The people in heaven are the kinds of people who would go down to hell to try to offer a drink of water to the people suffering there, and the people in Hades are the kinds of people who would let them.

That's why the chasm is set up. It's a terrible chasm, but it's certainly no less impassable than the chasm that the rich man set up between himself and Lazarus at the gate.

Despairing for himself, the rich man asks that Lazarus be sent to his father's house, to his five brothers to warn them. Okay, this at least seems to be a move forward for the rich man. At last he is thinking of someone other than himself.

But actually, he is still terribly self-centered. Does he think: "This is terrible. People have to know about this. *Everyone* needs to hear so that no one else will end up here."?

No, he does not. He doesn't think of everyone, only of his own family. He doesn't think about all the other people who need to hear the message. He thinks only of his brothers. And he is still treating Lazarus as a servant - send him to warn my brothers. He is still using people to do his bidding. He just doesn't get it. He would never dare say to Abraham, "You go tell my brothers." Never. But Lazarus - meh, he's poor, why not? He needs a job, right?

Abraham rebukes the man, saying that the brothers already have Moses and the prophets to listen to. The Jewish Bible is divided up into the books of Moses, which are the first five books of the Bible, and the Prophets, which here means the rest. In effect, what Abraham is saying is: “They have the Scriptures. If they won’t listen to that, what can we do?”

Naturally this isn’t enough for the rich man because he knows how easy it is to ignore Moses and the prophets. In fact, he did it himself.

His brothers will never change from being self-centered and self absorbed, they will never let go of thinking of themselves as better than others just by listening to the Moses and the Prophets.

They can hear and ignore Isaiah saying, “Is this not the fast that I choose, to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house, when you see the naked to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own brothers and sisters?” (Isaiah 58:6-7)

No, he says, send a man back from the dead and my brothers will listen, but otherwise there is no hope.

And Abraham replies, if they won’t listen to Moses and the prophets, then they won’t believe even if someone comes back from the dead.

I said that we usually find ourselves somewhere in the parables of Jesus, and that it seemed like our choices were to be either Lazarus or the rich man.

But there is now a third choice for us: we can see ourselves as the rich man’s brothers or sisters. We have Moses and the Prophets, yes, we have the Scriptures, but we also have the witness of one who has come back from the dead. Not Lazarus, of course, but Jesus!

There is still time to change our attitudes. We don’t have to go on like the rich man’s brothers. There’s still time for us to open our eyes to see the poor, to learn their names, to offer them help.

There’s still time for us to change our society so that we would be happy even if we had to change places with the poorest of the poor. There’s still time to make sure that no one is invisible, that everyone has a fair chance.

We can do it personally, we can do it in church, we can do it collectively as a society through our government, which is of the people, by the people and for the people, including all the Lazarus' among us. We can be that kind of person, offer that kind of help.

The parable ends without a conclusion. It leaves us, like the brothers, with the words of the Scriptures and the witness of one risen from the dead. The rest is left blank for us to draw in our own response to Jesus' words. Will we put our faith in Jesus and share our wealth with Lazarus. He's not invisible anymore. If we look, we'll see that he's right here, at our gate. Amen