

## At Our Gate

Luke 16:19-31

September 25, 2022

First Presbyterian, Luling

We have had an extra desk and file cabinets sitting right by our front door for months. Months. Andy got new ones and put them in the living room “temporarily.” We walked by them constantly. They were in the way every time we went in and out the front door. We hosted company with this furniture piled in the middle of the floor. I nagged. I nagged some more. Finally, I stopped seeing them. They were just there, part of the landscape. You know how you can see something all the time but not really *see* it? A major development of this week is that the Habitat Restore in Schulenburg came and picked up the extra furniture, and now we have “extra” space in the living room. Hallelujah.

Worse that getting so accustomed to something that you don’t see it is being so oblivious to *someone* that you don’t see them. We talked a bit about this last week. The clerk at the convenience store. The mail carrier. The garbage collector. The people I walk by at the nursing home as I go to Helen’s room. We do this all the time. It would be exhausting to have to interact with every single person we encounter, so we filter them, unconsciously, into people we need to *see* and people it’s not important that we see. Your filter may be different than mine, but I’m pretty sure we all do this. There are some people that we just fail to see.

That’s what I imagine the rich man in the parable was doing. He went in and out of the gate to his large property so many times a day, traveling right by Lazarus, begging beside it, that he simply no longer saw him. He knew he was there, even knew his name, because he uses it later, but he didn’t notice him, didn’t really take any time or energy to notice him, didn’t seem too concerned about him. I guess if you had asked him, “do you have a beggar named Lazarus who hangs out at your gate every day?” he would confirm that he did. But Lazarus had been there so long that the rich man had stopped noticing him. It was easier not to notice him, easier on his conscience, easier on his bank account, easier on his daily routine, just to pass by the beggar with the open wounds at his gate. The rich man just doesn’t really *see* Lazarus, certainly doesn’t see him as a fellow human being.

The situation changes, when both the rich man and Lazarus die. The rich man goes to Hades and Lazarus to heaven, to the bosom of Abraham. They are as

far apart as they ever have been. Before their deaths, they were separated by the rich man's overwhelming richness and Lazarus's overwhelming poverty. Now they are separated in death by the insurmountable chasm between them.

The rich man clearly understands that he is being punished, that Lazarus is in the more desirable place. And he clearly recognizes Lazarus. But he still doesn't even talk directly to him, or acknowledge that he is a person. Instead, he addresses Father Abraham—first, he asks Abraham to send Lazarus to him with a drink of cool water. When that doesn't work, he then asks Abraham to send Lazarus to his brothers to warn them of what is coming to them. He never speaks *to* Lazarus, he still never really *sees* Lazarus as an individual person, worthy of his respect. He's not driving by ignoring him completely, but he's only seeing Lazarus as someone who can do something for him. Using people, loving things, just like last week.

So if we understand this lack of seeing as one of the rich man's sins, then the conversation between him and Father Abraham takes on a distinct character. If the rich man's sin is failing to see his fellow human beings as actual people, as neighbors, as brothers and sisters, then his punishment results from this sin. His first request is that Lazarus go and get him a sip of cool water. This man from whom he had been separated, by his own actions, is suddenly the most important person in his world, because Lazarus can do something for him. Abraham's response is to describe the chasm between them, a chasm that no one can cross in either direction. This chasm is just as large as the chasm that separated the rich man and Lazarus in life, but it is different now. When they were alive, the rich man established the chasm, because it was expedient and easy for him to do so. Now that they are dead, the chasm is beyond his control. In both cases, he could see Lazarus if he really wanted to, but he chooses not to.

The rich man's next request to Abraham—notice he never even talks directly to Lazarus—is for Lazarus to go and warn his brothers to change their ways so they won't end up like him. He never says what exactly he wants them warned against, but he thinks Lazarus is the person to do it. Abraham responds that they already have the Scriptures to tell them all they need to know. Just like the rich man had gotten used to seeing Lazarus until he didn't really see him anymore, the brothers and many like them had gotten so accustomed to hearing the law and the prophets that they didn't really hear, didn't really listen any more.

The rich man protests that if someone comes back from the dead to warn them, then surely they will repent and change their ways. And Abraham says

sadly, no. Not even if someone came back from the dead. They still wouldn't hear, still wouldn't see, the reality that is at their gates.

Sometimes it's hard to figure out who we are supposed to identify with in a parable. But this one it's pretty clear. We are the rich man's brothers. We have all the information that we need, all the instruction and commandments in the law and the prophets. We have commandments to love God and to love our neighbor. We even have someone who has been resurrected from the dead to show and tell us the way to live. Will we listen? Will we see?

Seeing and hearing are two of our basic senses. In one sense, as long as our eyes and ears still function properly, they aren't really difficult. But really seeing and really hearing are much more difficult. If we really see people, we will form a relationship with them, we will be drawn into their lives, we will care about them and what happens to them. If we really hear the words of God, if we really listen to the people God has sent us, then we might be called to change, to do something more difficult than we have had to do, up until now.

Right at our gate are God's people, in all their diversity and quirks and shortcomings and gifts. We are called to open our eyes and see, to open our ears and hear.