

The Man Who Never Noticed
Presbyterian Church of New Rochelle
September 25, 2016

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day.
Luke 16:20-219 (NRSV)

Ever present God open our hearts and minds that we might hear your Word and be changed. Amen

I don't know about you but I find this morning's reading as visually arresting as any in the Bible. What the characters looked like, the clothes they wore, the striking reversal of fortune and even the use of names; it all adds up to a powerful and disturbing story. William A. Barclay says it "is constructed with such consummate skill that not one phrase is wasted." He also notes that Lazarus is the only character in all of the parables to be given a name – the Latinized form of Eleazar meaning God is my help. But just to avoid any confusion be aware that this is not the only Lazarus to make an appearance in the Gospels. Think back toward the end of Lent just days before Passion Week as Jesus and the disciples were nearing Jerusalem. Jesus was summoned urgently by Martha to attend to her dying brother Lazarus, who according to the gospel writer John, was a close friend of Jesus. By the time Jesus gets to Bethany, the brother of Martha and Mary, has been dead three days, wrapped in strips of cloth and placed in the tomb. Another cinematic scene but a completely different Lazarus.

The Lazarus we encounter this morning may or may not have been a real person but as a composite figure he represents the underclass in a visually unforgettable way. There is great irony in this because it seems that the rich man walked by him every single day without ever noticing. Jesus describes a poor man who lay at the entrance to the rich man's estate; a man who is covered with sores that the dogs would lick. The fact that he lay at the gate implies that Lazarus was lame or had difficulty walking; perhaps even sitting up. That he was covered in sores meant that he was malnourished at a minimum and perhaps had a skin disease like Hansen's disease or leprosy. The very image of Lazarus evokes feelings of pity and sorrow. In our

own time such a vision should evoke feelings that race past sorrow and pity to a strong sense of injustice and perhaps indignity. But we don't always get there because there is a countervailing narrative that blames the victim for a lack of industry and work ethic. But we will explore that in a moment.

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We know the rich man is also a memorable figure because over the years he has "acquired" a Latin nickname that means rich or wealthy. The name is Dives. Dives it seems has oodles of money which he lavishes on himself. He dresses in purple and fine linen and feasts in luxury *every* day. Barclay tells us the word used for feasting sumptuously means gourmet dining of rich and costly foods. He also notices that if he eats like that 7 days a week he is no doubt breaking the 4th commandment to honor the Sabbath and do no work!

We imagine that Dives lives in an impressive house that is shielded from the outside world by a wall with a single gate. It is just outside this gate that Lazarus can be found hoping that he might compete successfully with the dogs for what may fall from the rich man's table. Now I've read, and the cinema confirms! that folks in first century Rome ate with their hands – without the benefit of spoons or forks. For those who could afford it the food might be served on loaves of bread cut through the middle and used like a plate. The food would then be lapped up or nibbled off the bread; the wealthy would most often toss the bread – I know, the best part, right? This was what Lazarus longed for.

Then in the space of two compact sentences both men die and the scene shifts rather suddenly to Hades. We don't spend a lot of time talking about Hades here at PCNR – the word only appears in Scripture 10 times. But other words such as Sheol, hell or Gehenna appear more often and have various meanings as the concept evolved over the 1,500 years that the Bible was written. But nearly all of us have vivid images and strong beliefs about hell derived from our parents, Sunday school, or Hollywood. For this morning's purposes we can simply say it's a place or state of being we want to avoid! And this morning's parable certainly reinforces that: "send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames." These are the words of the rich man who looks up to see Abraham with Lazarus by his side. While heaven is not named, we presume that that is where the great patriarch Abraham and the poor man named Lazarus abide. The really bad news for the rich man is that this is the way it's going to be forever; the great chasm has been fixed so that no one can cross from there to us.

What is Jesus trying to tell us? What is it that the two principal characters did or did not do to justify their eternal dwelling place? Since humanity first began to think and write figuratively about the human condition we have known Dives and Lazarus. It seems there are similar stories from ancient Egypt, Athens, Dante's *Inferno*, and of course the wealth gap is a recurring theme throughout the prolific career of Charles Dickens. Since the dawn of time there has been a tension between the strong and the weak; the wealthy and the poor; those with power and those without. Is the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus simply another example of the genre? Is it simply a vivid confirmation of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God."?

In preparing for this morning nearly all the commentators I read focused rather narrowly on money and the wealth gap. And the reading from 1 Timothy clearly points us in that direction. And as we said last Sunday, wealth and money are two of the most frequently addressed subjects in all of

Scripture. In fact, according to one source money and wealth appear 800 times in Scripture while love is mentioned fewer than 600 times. In and of itself that doesn't tell us a great deal beyond the fact that money and wealth have been a challenging topic for humanity throughout recorded history. And while that clearly undergirds the meaning of this parable we gave money and wealth considerable attention last Sunday when we reflected on the Parable of the Dishonest Manager. Last Sunday we noted that money was inert and by itself was neither good or evil. Rather it was how money is used and how it affects the behavior of those who have it. As the writer to Timothy puts it, "money is a root of all kinds of evil (v.8)". But we can safely say that not everyone with money is sinful and not all who live in poverty are without sin. So this morning I want us to focus on William A. Barclay's take on this parable which he calls the Punishment of the Man Who Never Noticed, which I "borrowed" as the title of this morning's sermon.

It might be theologically imprecise to call *not noticing* a sin but as Barclay considers this parable he reckons that is why Dives is looking up to see Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. Failing to notice is not always a sin or a symptom of wealth although it seems in our own time the wealthier a person is, the more inclined they are to build bubbles around themselves to avoid having to look at the grit that is ever present. They live in gated communities or doorman buildings. They never use public transportation opting for limousines and private jets. Maintaining the bubble is often the motivating force for getting panhandlers and squeegee people off the streets – not to provide adequate shelter or gainful employment but to avoid having to look at "those people". In a related way, our politicians have built a narrative that blames poverty and poor health on Lazarus and his descendants. It is their lack of industry, their inability to get a job that provides healthcare that is the problem. Protecting that narrative allows us to turn away; it allows us to not to have to notice.

Visual imagery contributes significantly to the emotional punch of this parable but even more is how close it hits home. I was reminded three times

this week that I am the beneficiary of white privilege so I want to be careful here. The power of the story for me is the question of whether I behave like the rich man who never notices. I was in the city Thursday evening taking Metro-North and two subways to get to my destination. With this week's lesson in my mind I was sensitized to noticing. I noticed the classical musician busking at Grand Central Station; by the time I got to Times Square the violin had morphed into a wailing saxophone. Connecting underground from one subway to another, I noticed with *all* of my senses the man rifling through his wire basket, barely clothed. As he tried to settle into a place to spend the night, I noticed he had no need for shoes because both legs were amputated just above the knee. As someone closer to Dives than Lazarus, what was I to do? I did what I usually do; I made my way to the Shuttle without pausing hoping to catch an earlier train; hoping that my tax dollars and contributions to the Salvation Army and others might somehow provide a safety net for this man. My intuition told me he needed mental health care as much as hygiene and nutrition but that only made my noticing worse. Was I constructing my own protective narrative?

What might I have done differently Thursday night? Practically speaking, in today's society, very little. But Jesus pushes us to do the impractical; to behave radically as an example for others to emulate; to stretch the rules to the breaking point. What might that look like? Earlier this week my attention was drawn to a rather extraordinary and uplifting story in the Chicago Tribune. The subject of the story was Fidencio Sanchez, a wizened 89-year-old food vendor. He is sort of the Lazarus of the story. Adding an amusing twist for you literary types, the shining knight is named Cervantes! Cervantes whose given name is Joel was on his way to work when he noticed Sanchez struggling to push his food cart up the hill. The effort was taking a toll but Sanchez needed to work in order to survive. Joel bought a snack, took a picture and posted it on Facebook. A friend saw it and contacted Joel and together they organized the largest GoFundMe campaign in the history of Illinois. The punchline of the story is Cervantes presented Sanchez with a check for more

than \$385,000! There were no windmills in sight! Only grace and generosity. That's pretty radical.

Let me close with a challenge by way of a reminder. PCNR has not spent the Madeline Mueller bequest of \$20,000. What radical thing might we do with that money for the injustice we notice in our neighborhood? How might we create a fishes and loaves moment for the Lazarus that lay outside our gate?

Gracious God grant us the wisdom and creativity to be your faithful servants in this time and place.

Amen