

Wesley United Methodist Church

September 29, 2013

"God Noticed."

Luke 16:19-31

A comedian shared this story, "I used to think I was poor. Then they told me I wasn't poor, I was needy. Then they told me it was self-defeating to think of myself as needy. I was deprived. Oh, not deprived but rather underprivileged. Then they told me that underprivileged was overused. I was disadvantaged." "I still don't have a dime," the comedian concludes, "But I have a great vocabulary." Whatever we may call it, being poor isn't any fun.

"There was a rich man..." said Jesus. If there was ever a parable that should keep us awake at night, it is the story of the rich man and Lazarus. Compared to most of the people in the world, we are quite rich. That's why most of us would prefer not to think too much about this parable.

"We are saved by grace, not by works," we tell ourselves, so we skip over this parable and other teachings of Jesus. We are very much like the rich man in our ability to see only those teachings of Jesus that we want to see. How many of us have ever noticed how often Jesus talked about our responsibilities to the poor and down-trodden?

"For I was hungry," the Son of Man will say on the Last Day, "and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me. They will answer, "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?" He will reply, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me" (Matthew 25:42-45).

How many of us ever really notice the problems of the poor in our society?

Eleanor Roosevelt, the wife of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, remembered that before they were married, she was working at University Settlement in New York City. Franklin called her there late in the afternoon. She wasn't ready because there was a sick child at the Settlement and she had to see that the child was taken home. Franklin said he would go with her.

They took the child to an area not far away and Franklin went with her up the three flights to the tenement rooms in which the family lived. It was not a pleasant place and Franklin Roosevelt looked around in surprise and horror. It was the first time that he had ever really seen a slum. When he got back to the street he drew a deep breath of fresh air. "My God," he whispered, "I didn't know people live like that."

Obviously that experience had an enormous impact on the man who would be your longest serving president. But he's not alone. Most of us are unaware under what miserable conditions many people in our world live.

The rich man in this parable, of course, is not alone, or Jesus would not have told this story. All over the world in every generation, those who have much in terms of the world's goods, turn a blind eye to those who have practically nothing.

According to a report released by the World Bank, nearly 2.8 billion people still live on the equivalent of two dollars a day or less. Of these, some 1.1 billion survive in extreme or absolute poverty on less than one dollar. Does anybody care? A few do, but it is still amazing to what lengths some people will go to not notice.

Notice that Jesus said in his parable that Lazarus "was laid" at the rich man's gate. He didn't walk there or drive there. He was an invalid who had to be laid there. Lazarus was totally helpless. There were no welfare programs. He obviously had no family to care for him. All he could do was beg, but the rich man couldn't be bothered even to share a few coins. He refused to even acknowledge Lazarus' existence. He was the one who refused to notice.

Well, there was one who did notice. God noticed. Luke tells us that the time came when Lazarus died. And what happened then? Jesus tells us, "The angels carried Lazarus to Abraham's side." What a beautiful image. This time it wasn't friends or concerned neighbors who carried Lazarus home at the end of a long day begging. It was the angels. God knew Lazarus' situation. God cared about Lazarus.

Jesus identified Lazarus. Lazarus was named. That is significant. When giving a parable, Jesus never named a character, not even once. The rich man was nameless, but Lazarus was named. The difference is ever so big. It is the difference between being known and honored by God and not being known and honored by God. Lazarus knew God and was known by God. His very name, Lazarus, means God is my Help or Helper.

By naming Lazarus and not the rich man, Jesus' story contrasts with worldly understandings of who's who. As was his style, Jesus reminds us that heaven is the opposite of this world in many respects, especially when it comes to rating an individual's worth in society.

Some high-school students were asked to name some rich people in our society. "Bill Gates, Donald Trump, The Middle Eastern Oil Guys, and Oprah," were some of the names they listed. Then they were asked to name some of the people in their town who beg, or are homeless. The students made vague references to "that one guy who sleeps behind a local store and that crazy lady always asking for change when they come out of McDonalds". We all understand what Jesus was saying: God cares about everybody, especially those that society would rather not notice and definitely not name. God noticed Lazarus and cared about him.

God also noticed the actions of the rich man who refused to notice the poor man at his gate. Luke tells us, "The rich man also died and was buried. In hell, where he was in torment, the rich man looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.' "But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony...'"

Why do you suppose the rich man was in hell? It was because God noticed him as well. But why did God deal with him so harshly? There is no record of a vicious, glaring sin; no record of a public sin. He was not cruel, as far as we know. He never ordered Lazarus from his gate or refused Lazarus the crumbs from his table. He was not a tyrant; nor an oppressor of the poor, not a monstrous member of society. Rather, he may well have been a socially responsible, upright citizen, respected and well liked. No earthly court would ever think of arresting or condemning him. In society's eyes he was honored and highly esteemed. People liked him and spoke well of him. What then was his sin? It was the sin of not noticing.

How often do you and I take time to notice the people around us, their needs, their concerns? Not just the homeless people asking for handouts on a city street, but the lonely teen 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 left behind by a culture that no longer values his talents? 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 preoccupied with our own cares and concerns that we give no thoughts to the problems of those about us.

There was some research about why some people are generous and compassionate, while others are not. Many compassionate people at some point in their lives had someone act with compassion toward them.

There is a story about Jack Casey. "All I ever learned from my father is that I didn't want to be like him," he once said. He was raised in a tough home. His father was an alcoholic. But something happened

to Jack when he was a child that changed his life. Jack needed surgery and he was terrified. But there was a nurse who remained by his side, holding his hand, reassuring him that everything would be okay. "I'll be right here, no matter what," she told him. And she kept her word; she was there and greeted him with a smile the moment he opened his eyes.

Years later, Jack became a paramedic and he was called to the scene of an accident. A man was pinned upside down in his pickup. Jack did his best to free the trapped man even as gasoline dripped down on them. The man was afraid that he was going to die as the rescuers worked to free him. One spark and the whole scene would go up in flames.

Jack remembered back when he was a child and the nurse who never left. He took the man's hands and squeezed them as he said, "Don't worry! I'm right here with you! I'm not going anywhere!" Days after the rescue, the two men embraced as the driver said to Jack, "You know, you were crazy to stay there with me. We both could've died." Jack smiled. "I just couldn't leave you."

Here is the point of today's message. There was a time, spiritually, when each of us was a beggar lying at the gate totally helpless, and Christ noticed us and Christ loved us just as we are. As we remember that truth, that compassion, that grace, Christ calls us to look around and see someone who needs our attention, our compassion, our love. Research shows that the person might just remember our generous attention when he or she is in the position to help someone else. And so, that original act of kindness and love is extended perhaps forever. But you can't be part of this chain of love if you never take time to look beyond your own cares and concerns. Don't be like the rich man who will forever be remembered as the person who refused to notice. Look around you today, to someone who needs your love. Amen.