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Saint John's Episcopal Church
Sandwich, Massachusetts 02563

September 26, 2010
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Today's sermon is taken from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 16, verses 19-31.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen

You may notice that some people are clueless about very important things. One man said his wife doesn't complain often, but once they were having an old-fashioned heart-to-heart talk, and she said, "Hon, you never listen to me. Every time I try to talk to you, you get this faraway look in your eyes after only a few seconds. Please promise me you'll try to work on that." He says the last thing he remembers was replying, "I'm sorry, what was that you were saying?" Of course, many wives would allege that their husbands are clueless.

One woman said that she and her husband were snuggled together on the floor one chilly winter evening watching television; and during a commercial break, she said he reached over and gave her foot a gentle squeeze. "Um," she said, "that's so sweet of you." "Actually," he admitted sheepishly, "I thought your foot was the remote."

Jesus told a parable about a rich man who was dressed in fine linen and lived in absolute luxury. At the rich man's gate lay a beggar named Lazarus, and Lazarus was covered with sores. He longed to eat even scraps that fell from the rich man's table. He lay there day after day in misery. Dogs came and licked his sores. Every day when the rich man left his estate he had to pass by Lazarus. Do you think he ever paid attention to Lazarus? I doubt it.

Lazarus was a nobody in the rich man's world. If he was noticed at all, it was probably as an object of disgust. It's interesting though in Jesus' parable we know Lazarus' name. We don't know the rich man's name. However, there came a time when the rich man did notice Lazarus. "The time came when the beggar died," said Jesus, "and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died," said Jesus, "but he didn't go to

Abraham's side. Instead he found himself in hell, and from this realm of torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away. Then the rich man couldn't believe his eyes. There at Abraham's side was this poor beggar who had lain outside his gate -- this man of no importance -- this man of no consequence -- Lazarus. But while the rich man languished in hell, Lazarus was in glory.

Now, remember, this is a parable, not an allegory. We should not take this as a literal picture of heaven and hell. In this parable, the rich man could look into heaven, and he could call out to Abraham, which he did. "Father Abraham, have pity on me," he cried. "Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue because I am in agony in this fire." The rich man still didn't get it, did he? He still thought that Lazarus ought to serve him. He was absolutely clueless about the way the kingdom of God works.

Abraham reminds the rich man that in this world he had many nice things while Lazarus had none. And besides, he says, there's a chasm between heaven and hell that cannot be bridged. In other words, it was too late for the rich man. His fate was sealed. He had turned his head too many times in ignoring the beggar at his gate. The rich man still didn't get it. "Then I beg you, father," he cried, "send Lazarus to my father's house for I have five brothers. Let him warn them so that they will not come to this place of torment." And Abraham replied, "they have Moses and the prophets; let them listen to them." "No, father Abraham," said the rich man, "but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent." Abraham said, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

This is a powerful parable. There are people in your world that you don't even see -- needy people. Actually, they are everywhere, aren't they; maybe within our own family, or next door, or in the next cubicle at the office. They may not be covered with sores; there may be no dogs licking their sores, but you can see the hurt in their eyes.

Among those remarkable men who have served our nation was a man known as a rough rider. His name was Theodore Roosevelt. Part of the mythology surrounding this vigorous outdoorsman was that as a child he was very sickly and suffered severely from asthma. According to the myth he overcame his asthma through a rigorous regimen of physical activities

including body building and boxing. In reality, according to his biographer David McCullough, Teddy Roosevelt had stopped suffering from asthma long before he took up his athletic activities. The chief factor in his physical recovery seems to have been his removal from his family setting. "When he went to Harvard," says David McCullough, "his illness magically disappeared; in fact, there is a good question Roosevelt suffered from asthma at all." For one thing, his so-called attacks always occurred on one day of the week -- Sunday. Coincidentally perhaps, Sunday was the one day of the week when Roosevelt's father was home and could take care of him. In short, the attacks may have been simply an attention-getting device from a son who craved fatherly attention; and if his attacks were a device for getting attention, they worked exceedingly well.

The family was very wealthy and whenever young Teddy wheezed even slightly, he was whisked off to the country, or even to Europe, where a bevy of servants was waiting at his beck and call. Anything, anything, to help little Teddy. However, little Teddy was starved for his parents' attention, and perhaps this is why all his lifelong Theodore Roosevelt loved the limelight. As his son would later remark about Teddy, "When father goes to a wedding, he wants to be the bride; and when he goes to a funeral, he wants to be the corpse."

Have you ever been around a child who is starved for attention? They are on every playground; some of them can be an absolute nuisance. If they do not get the attention they crave, some of them can end up being a lifelong problem for society. Who in their own family doesn't even see that? Of course, children are not the only ones who are starved for attention: spouses, friends, aging family members and shut-ins, and people with disabilities. They are not on our radar, they can't serve our needs, so sometimes we don't even see them. It happens all the time. We are in a hurry; we've got places to go and people to meet and goals to accomplish, and like the gynecologist with the pregnant wife, we do not see what is right before our eyes.

Most of us have a machine that sets off a buzzer when an evil thought crosses our mind; it's called a conscience. But what I think we really need is a machine that will tell us when there are people around us who need us -- people we are overlooking right outside the gates of our consciousness.

Love sees. That's the first thing that I want you to understand from this parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Love, true love, sees. The rich man

passed this poor beggar day after day and never really saw him until it was too late. You and I need to train our eyes to see those around us. Being sensitive to others is not something that comes naturally to most of us. It's something at which we need to work.

Marion and I, two weeks ago, decided to take a walk in downtown Hyannis, and we hadn't really done that in a number of years. We walked around the harbor area first of all, and then we went up, and we walked almost the entire length of Main Street. And, you know, I was interested in getting my ice cream at Ben & Jerry's and going into the Kennedy Museum and going into this furniture store in Hyannis that's going out of business; I was thinking about these other things. But then, all of a sudden, I began to notice those people who weren't dressed as well as the rest of us, and those people who sort of were wandering along -- it looked like they were trying to find something -- and to realize that in our county of Barnstable, we have a lot of homeless people, we have a lot of hungry people.

Being sensitive to others is something we need to work at, but love sees, and love acts. Not only did the rich man not even see Lazarus at his gates, there's no evidence that he ever did anything to help Lazarus' situation. All he did was turn a blind eye.

Alexander Woollcott, the highly regarded critic and commentator for the *New Yorker* magazine, had a special friend to whom he always took a special gift. His friend's name was Helen Keller. I think most of you know who Helen Keller was. Helen Keller was a special lady who could neither see nor hear, but still was an outstanding author and speaker. Alexander Woollcott knew that beautiful flowers would mean nothing to a blind woman. So, when he went to see Helen, he took her great bunches of geranium leaves; the leaves emitted a spicy, fresh fragrance that he knew she enjoyed. Woollcott learned one of the lessons of caring -- fit the gift to the recipient. That takes a very special sensitivity. Love sees and love acts.

One guy was trying to be humorous. He told about a friend of his. He said, "Oh, George and I are great buddies. There's nothing we won't do for one another; and that's how we spend our lives: doing nothing for one another."

Unfortunately, that's true of far too many of us. Love sees and love acts. And finally, when a loved one dies they fall apart with guilt. They feel guilty, not because they ever said anything mean about the deceased.

Certainly they had never abused their loved one, except through neglect: “I should have been there, I should have done this, I should have done that. I just didn’t realize.” How wonderful it would feel at such a time if we knew that we had done what we should have. We saw, we cared, we showed our love. There is healing in such knowledge.

In the parable, there was no indication that the rich man was a bad man. He was just clueless. He didn’t see, he didn’t act, he probably spent eternity mumbling, “Where in the world have I been?”

Amen

Transcribed by Phyllis K. Briggs

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