

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
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Proper 21 Year C
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Living within firm boundaries can bring an ease and comfort to our lives. Abiding where rigid expectations regarding the people to associate with, the clothes to wear, the higher education or professions to pursue, the concerns to have, are proscribed by our particular economic, social, or religious affiliation can give us a sense of a straight-line trajectory to our life and there can be comfort in this certainty, when we stay behind our self-imposed or self-constructed boundaries which differentiate us from others who are unlike us. Where I grew up our elementary school class was a homogenous group on all possible factors: race, ethnicity, religious affiliation, economic class, and interests. We were told not to worry about those who lived "on the other side of the tracks" and were encouraged to look away when someone from another neighborhood wandered into ours.

In our parable today, we see some very firm boundaries in place, which result in an attempt to justify unrighteous behavior, especially on the part of the rich man. His boundaries were so firm and his borders so high, he had grown numb to the suffering on his very own doorstep.

This parable, in Luke's gospel, was written during the Second Temple Period of the history of the Israelites. Those who heard this story were thus living in the tension between the Hebrew theologies which would support the rich man's avoiding the poor and sick man; the emphasis on purity's being achieved by remaining isolated from the impure, the theology that connected prosperity with God's blessings and poverty with sinfulness and the backbone of Jewish belief that God cares most for the poor and needy and therefore we are commanded to do likewise. The hearers of the story would have known by heart the passage from Deuteronomy, "Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land." In our parable, Jesus makes it very clear how to resolve this tension: erase the boundaries between us and others, which can, of course, make everyone's lives better, albeit a bit messier and more complex.

Jesus appears to intentionally draw a picture of such extremes between the rich and poor men so that no one hearing the parable, then or now, can completely identify with either of the main characters. And as soon as we cannot completely identify with someone else, we have created a boundary that separates us from them.

The poor in the original audience were probably comforted by Jesus' reminder that God cares especially for the poor and needy and felt vindicated in knowing that their reward would yet come in the heavenly life, probably remembering the beatitude, "Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." Yet they, like us, may not completely understand Lazarus' plight, for, in addition to being poor, he was also despicable and untouchable, with the dogs licking the sores, so much was utterly outcast.

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Those who heard this parable who are wealthy or comfortable in their material goods, who own nice clothes, who eat abundantly each evening, who at times eat at the homes of the extravagantly wealthy, were most likely the priests or Pharisees who served the local temple. But they too could find a way to differentiate themselves from the villain in the story, for they would justify their situation and love of fine things by claiming a sense of righteousness that they used all these things to the glory of God.

The regular people hearing the parables, like us, artisans, craftspeople, teachers, professionals, could not quite relate to the extreme poverty or the wealth of the characters in the parable and so had differentiated themselves from either one, building their boundary by their ignorance of people being other than they were.

Part of the brilliance and design of this parable is that, since we can see into each of these extremes without entirely identifying with either of them, we are left wondering who we are in this parable.

Reactions may range from ashamedly dreaming of the wealth of the rich man, to fear that we're too much like him, using too many of our resources for ourselves without considering the poor, to fear of destitution and rejection from others in our community, like the poor man.

As long as we don't specifically identify with either one, it's hard to know how we are to look with more open eyes or respond with a more compassionate heart, as long as we can say they aren't really like me. This can be one of the building blocks of the boundary, confusion around who we are and who the "other" is.

Now one of the things in the parable that tells us we are to relate to the poor man is that he is given a name. In all the parables, in all the gospels, there are only two instances when characters are named, and both times are in this parable. Generally, we hear only about the rich man, the eldest son, the master, the slaves, the persistent widow. Here, Jesus names the poor man Lazarus and Father Abraham.

Abraham, at this time in the development of Jewish theology was known as the father of hospitality. We may remember the story of Abraham and Sarah welcoming the three travelers, who turned out to be angels, in the desert, with a fine meal and generous hospitality. We can imagine if the poor man had arrived outside of Abraham's tent, he would have been cared for, fed, healed, and embraced by the household. So it's no surprise to us that the criteria regarding whether you sat near Abraham and God in the heavenly kingdom were the extent to which you extended hospitality during your lifetime. There were no boundaries or barriers in Abraham's heart, only love and compassion.

The name Lazarus means "God has helped". As soon as we heard this name, we probably remembered the story in John's gospel where Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, which was the turning point in that gospel of the persecution of Jesus. But it is curious that it doesn't appear God has helped Lazarus during his lifetime and that, certainly, others didn't help him?

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no one appeared to give him food, no one appeared to heal his sores, no one even noticed him. So many boundaries had been built around him that he had become invisible to all.

Jesus gives this poor man a name to help us relate more closely to him and yet curiously gives the man no voice. Did you notice, that he never speaks in the story? Never in the parable does anyone speak directly to him. Never did anyone ask for his story. No one wondered about his plight and how they might help. No one knew him. He had no voice. Was God waiting for others to listen to him, or to be his voice? Is this how God expected to give Lazarus help? Through those around him?

This raises questions for us: Whose voice around us do we need to listen to? Whose outcast voice do we need to represent in our community? Whose voice must we be?

In order to listen to someone else's voice, we often need to break down a few interior barriers. Many times I drove from Chambersburg to Shippensburg and saw, but grew numb to, the billboard about human trafficking in Franklin County. Even after seeing this billboard numerous times, I never imagined to look for victims in the public restrooms in the Welcome Centers. I never attentively searched for possible victims in the business establishments which frequently use the people forced into slavery, such as hotel housekeeping or nail salons. But then I listened to their voice, through several seminars offered by Women In Need. I heard the stories of these people, girls and boys. I listened to the stories of the prosecutor hired in Franklin County due specifically to the prevalence of these cases, and I have allowed their stories to inform my life. I could feel the boundaries within my own heart blurring. I may not really know these victims, but I know they have something to speak to in my life.

I imagine we have all had a similar experience, when a group of people we had previously had little or no exposure to, we suddenly listen to, we become in relationship with, and the internal boundaries blur. Something, maybe Jesus' voice, awakens within us an awareness and compassion which helps us see how alike we all are, not different.

Clearly one main message of this parable is that wealth is a snare, which will eventually lead to our suffering, poverty, and deep hunger. Our story tells us the only way to avoid the snare is to heed God's relentless commands to aid the poor and sick. Jesus is challenging us to care from a place that costs us something within: the destruction of whatever boundaries we have created to protect our lives, heart or status. Jesus is asking us, I believe, to give money to SPO and collect canned goods for King's Kettle AND also to invite the hungry into our homes, an act which we now do with the Community Meals; to put money into the collection plate to support our ministries AND to use our resources to provide jobs and support for those in need, a dream which continues to emerge among our vestry and those interested in social justice advocacy here at St. Andrew's, to support our Pumpkin Patch which provides benevolent care for some of the residents of The Episcopal Home AND to treat the all residents of The Episcopal Home as beloved family members who deserve love and care, to offer Giant gift cards to those who come to us for help AND to ask them for their story, so we can learn from them.

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Our parable is about recognizing and understanding the boundaries that we construct, somewhat so our lives might be clearer, more distinct, and easier to live by, but Jesus reminds us that the boundaries we construct are not the way of the kingdom.

The only redemptive moment of the rich man arises through his concern for his brothers. He wants to save them from his fate, which appears to be irrevocable. He asks Father Abraham to send Lazarus to his brother, for surely if they hear the command to help the poor from a man who was raised from the dead, they will believe and change their ways.

Of course, this morning, we are hearing this same command from a man who will be raised from the dead later in Luke's narrative and we are invited to change our ways. Just like the rich man's brothers, we have all the information we need to live righteously. We have the law and the prophets and we also have Jesus Christ, who tore down the ultimate boundary, that between God and humankind. Each time we receive the body and blood of Christ, we encounter the living Christ, and we live in the "torn-down" place where there is no separation between God and us. We are then to take this boundary-less place and bring it out into our world, for this is the kingdom of God brought near, where nothing separates us from the love of God and our love of others.
Amen.

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