

Jesus' parable about the rich man and Lazarus points out the chasms that divide the affluent from the needy. In life, Lazarus lay at the rich man's door but might as well have been invisible for all the attention he received. In death the rich man was separated from Lazarus across the chasm between heaven and hell, and even Abraham was powerless to cross that chasm. Only at the end of the story, when Abraham tells the rich man that his brothers are unlikely to listen to a new messenger, is there a breath of possibility that the divide could be bridged.

There is plenty of support in the Hebrew Bible for the idea that wealth is a reward for righteousness. That's what the histories assert, and the book of Proverbs offers some supportive wisdom like 5:6 "Go to the ant, you lazybones; consider its ways, and be wise. . . . A little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want, like an armed warrior." Or 3:9-10: "Honor the Lord with your substance and with the first fruits of all you produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine." It is also true that the Law repeatedly tells people that they must care for the widow, the orphan and the alien in their midst, and it's true that Proverbs warns against pursuing wealth and losing less tangible values; nevertheless perhaps selective attention created the consensus that wealth was a sign that God had rewarded you for your righteousness.

Jesus is pushing back against this social consensus with the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. In death, their situations have been reversed, and Lazarus now has everything he needs, while the rich man is unable even to relieve his thirst. Moreover, as Abraham points out, he should have known during his life that he had

a responsibility to Lazarus, because just like his brothers, the rich man had access to the scriptures of Moses and the prophets. He wasn't ignorant about God's will; he simply chose to ignore it because it would have meant compromising his very comfortable lifestyle.

The surface-level lesson of this parable is one that I think we've internalized well. We do care about poverty, and we try to relieve the suffering of as many people as we can, in a variety of ways, from paying fuel bills at Pine Ridge to microlending through Kiva to giving our four annual UCC offerings to serving a free dinner every month to calling our legislators about bills that affect the poor. We are all about paying attention to the poor and sharing generously, and it pains us that we cannot do enough.

The second level of this parable is also familiar. At the second level, you notice the way the rich man has carried his sense of privilege even to hell with him. In the torments of Hades, having had what you might have thought was quite the reality check, he still thinks he can get Lazarus to run errands for him. He doesn't even ask Lazarus directly; he asks Abraham to send him, as if Abraham were some kind of heavenly concierge. It's still all about him. It would be nice if he said first, Oh, how I regret ignoring Lazarus when he lay starving outside my gate. It would show some awareness that Lazarus has intrinsic value as a fellow human being. But no, the rich man can't quite get himself there.

I read a reflection by somebody about a church council meeting where they decided that instead of giving money to people who came to the church office asking for a handout, they'd give vouchers to the grocery store. That way they felt greater

certainty that they weren't enabling addiction or bad behavior. But then someone pointed out that you can get more than food at the grocery store, so they amended the policy to state that the vouchers were for food only. The woman writing the reflection said that she was cranky that evening, and asked why a poor person shouldn't be able to buy a few carnations to brighten their street corner, or a magazine to read before sleeping. I guess she retracted her question quickly, but she was irritated because everyone was so pleased with themselves for creating this nifty way to deal with beggars, and it seemed to her that they were more interested in absolving themselves of responsibility than in taking the dignity of others seriously.

I also think she was being cranky and unreasonable, but I take her point. Her church council was all too glad to have an elegant way to get the poor off their consciences. But this isn't a new insight for us either. We do take seriously the dignity of others. We don't attach strings to our gifts, and we try to offer help that empowers others, like our microlending. We are aware of the ways that well-intentioned charity can backfire and undermine the good that's intended. I don't mean to be smug, but I don't think the standard sermon on the rich man and Lazarus would be particularly helpful here.

So what does this parable have to say to us? If anything, it can feel almost overwhelming as a reminder that nothing we do is ever enough. But the gospel is supposed to be *good* news. And I think there's some good news at the third level of the parable.

Beneath the obvious lesson that the rich man should have offered help to

Lazarus, beneath the less obvious lesson that the rich man needed to take seriously the intrinsic value of other people, there is also an invitation to *pay attention*. Pay attention. The rich man did not pay attention to Lazarus because he didn't know he was important. Yet he knew Moses and the prophets and their teachings about caring for the poor. He was just too caught up in his own storyline about whatever he thought was important to take note of what lay outside his storyline.

Someone has said that when you see a painting on the wall, it's a message that an artist has been at work, but actual art is the process itself. If it was a good process, every time you view the painting you are invited into a small journey or some slightly new experience. Art makes us pay attention in the sense that it wakes us up or invites us out.

“To live in the present, in its temporality, its contingency and perishing takes courage. It takes vision to locate ourselves in reality. To pay attention is the work of deep spiritual awareness.” (George Hermanson)
<http://www.georgehermanson.com/2010/09/paying-attention-year-c-pentecost-september-25-october-1-proper-21-ordinary-26-sermon.html>

Our pictures of paths this Lent are also ways to encourage the habit of attention.

Living attentively ought to help us pick up hints and clues for living right—and by living right I mean the Buddhist sense of living accurately, with attention toward what *is* rather than what we prefer or are stuck in. The rich man didn't know he was so closely connected to Lazarus; he was living inaccurately. “God in our living redeems the world, moment by moment, action by action. Jeremiah tells his people who are in despair to go out and plant a garden, buy a field. In other words, hope that is based in paying attention to the needs around us. Paying attention to those tasks that will create a future for all” (Hermanson).

We have scripts or patterns for how to act responsibly, and it would be ridiculous to try to re-invent the wheel every day. A mission meeting now and then, an effort to revisit our relationship at Pine Ridge, and I think we're pretty good—we're doing what we can with our regular schedule of meals and offerings and microloans. But the point about attention is that we don't know what we don't know—and the awakened mind is capable of receiving surprises and invitations and even new strength for the journey. So while we're on our regular, disciplined schedule, we should also not sleepwalk through it. Practice silence, practice mindfulness, and prepare to see ever more clearly.

Divine Word,

You sent Moses to speak law to the people and bring order to chaos. You sent prophets to speak repentance and bring hope to the hopeless. You sent your son, Jesus, to become your living Word. Open our ears to hear your word, and our hearts to reflect the light of your truth to others, for the sake of the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. Amen.