

“Tales from the Other Side”
Luke 16:19-31

We are going to play a little game today. I am going to ask you to guess the name of the person I am describing. He is the 2nd richest person in the world. He is a software visionary. Until recently he was the founder and CEO of a large software company. Any guesses? Bill Gates! How about this one? She is 24 years old. She is the most famous artist singer in the world according to Time Magazine. She wears the most outrageous outfits, even by the standards of Hollywood. Any guesses? Lady Gaga! The names of rich people and celebrities are known to us, whether in good or bad ways. Somehow wealth, high positions, power and sometimes even violence command our attention, especially when it comes to public life and the media. This of course is not new to humanity; we just have more ways to communicate such information in our day and time.

Yet, in our Bible story for today we see Jesus doing the opposite of what is normal for human beings. In the telling of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus reverses our expectations about who is important and who is not. In this parable we hear Jesus naming the man who is on the bottom of the social ladder, while leaving the rich man nameless. The poor man is given a name, Lazarus. This is the only person in all of the parables of Jesus who is called by name. In contrast we see that the rich man just being labeled as rich. What is even more intriguing about this is the fact that the name Lazarus in Hebrew means, “God helps.” So, Jesus was clearly assigning tremendous significance to the one who is seen by society as the least important one of all. The whole parable exaggerates this point in order to make it clear for all who were listening. The two men in the parable clearly come from two social classes. The rich man is someone who is not just rich. He would be in our terms today one of the wealthiest men in the world. He lived in a gated house which was only the privilege of nobility. He wore purple clothes which was another sign of nobility. He feasted sumptuously every day. On the other hand, we are given a vivid image of how severe life was for Lazarus. He waited every day for crumbs to fall off the rich man’s table in order to eat. He also had severe sores on his body. What is worse is that the dogs licked his wounds. Dogs in that culture were considered unclean and vicious. But even the dogs took pity on Lazarus and licked his wounds. The parable could not be any stronger in its language about the difference between the life of Lazarus and the life of the rich man. The purpose of this sharp contrast was to show the people that the reality of the kingdom of God about which Jesus was preaching was so different from that of the reality of the world as they knew it. In the kingdom of God which Jesus invited his disciples to proclaim and to live, the poor are important to God. Their names are known to God and are just as important as rich and powerful people. What is also interesting about this parable is the fact that Jesus reverses a religious and theological concept about prosperity and blessing. In that time, and even in our time to a certain extent, wealth was seen as a sign of God’s blessing, while poverty was seen as a sign of God’s displeasure. In a way it was seen as God’s will to have some people rich and others poor. But here was Jesus challenging that worldview by telling a parable showing that God’s blessing was not connected to wealth. In fact, the opposite was true. The one who abused his wealth to the exclusion of those in need was the one who did not receive God’s blessing.

Imagine the challenge of such a teaching in that time! Imagine that way of thinking operating in our time for our daily lives! Who are the people we would pay more attention to in our media and in our daily lives if we saw that God’s love extended to all, especially to those who are hurting the most in our world?

In the parable the rich man is not presented as cruel kind of person who chose to ignore Lazarus on purpose. He simply did not even see him. He was invisible to him. Their worlds were so different from each other that it was impossible for the rich man to even notice Lazarus. This parable is not a story about a focus on the other side as in eternal life. It is a story about learning to see people on the other side of our social class gates.

This is an important challenge for us today. Even though we don't live in houses with gates around them, our social classes still define the people we deal with and the people we notice in our daily lives. In her book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, Ruby Payne presents a challenge to her readers about understanding the different norms of poverty and classes. Through careful research Payne shows that there are hidden rules for each social class and these rules can act as gates keeping people in one social class or another. These gates can become our blinders for seeing the people in other classes for who they are. She gives some examples in the form of a quiz. "Could you survive poverty?...I know which grocery stores' garbage bins can be accessed for thrown-away food...I know how to get someone out of jail...I know how to keep my clothes from being stolen at the Laundromat...I know how to live without a checking account...I know how to move in half a day." These are some of the things that Ruby Payne has found to be true of most people in generational poverty. Then she moves up to the questions about being in middle class. Here are the statements that are true about people in this class, "I know how to get my children into Little League, piano lessons, soccer, etc. I know how to properly set a table. I know how to order in a nice restaurant. I know how to decorate the house for the different holidays." Here are some statements that are true for people in the upper class. "I can read a menu in French, English and another language. I have several favorite restaurants in different countries of the world. During the holidays, I know how to hire a decorator to identify the appropriate themes and items with which to decorate the house...I support or buy the work of a particular artist." Payne concludes in this section that, "The bottom line in generational poverty is entertainment and relationships. In middle class, the criteria against which most decisions are made relate to work and achievement. In wealth, it is the ramifications of the financial, social, and political connections that have the weight." These hidden rules for social behavior are deeply embedded in our human cultures and it is hard for us to understand the values and actions of people in another social class. In a way, this is what Jesus was dealing with in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. The rich man in his discussion with Abraham showed that he truly did not understand what was going on before he died. The social barriers of our classes can be so blinding to us that is important for us to be intentional about crossing them and reaching out to people on the other side of those gates. This week the United Nations met to discuss their millennium goals for reducing poverty by half. They set this goal in 2000. Ten years have passed and poverty not only did not decrease, it has increased dramatically. Even in countries like ours, poverty is on the rise and income inequality has gone out of control. What we need more than anything is bridging those chasms that exist between our people and their social classes. This is not only about getting people to give more money. It is about our willingness to invest in relationships and communities, to notice those in our world who are often invisible. We are called just like Jesus did in the parable to know the names and life stories of those who are in need in our communities.

Last Sunday I walked into the kitchen in our church and saw and smelled great food. This was the food which the mission committee and our youth took to Cameron House in Rochester. It was food fit for a king. What was neat to see in that experience of outreach is that the church invested not only time and money into preparing the meal, but also they connected with the people who came to dinner. Our outreach efforts are not only about giving a handout. They are truly about reaching out in love and knowing the stories and lives of our friends and neighbors in order to change the systems that oppress people.

Nancy Ortberg, a Presbyterian minister at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, preached a sermon on work that caught the attention of the publisher of *Forbes* magazine, who cited it in an editorial. Ortberg told how Max DePree, former CEO of Herman Miller, and an intentional Christian, used to have his management team every week, on Wednesday, “bring a brown bag lunch and go down to the factory floor, where the furniture was being made, to eat. They were to sit for an hour and listen, get to know the names of the workers, their challenges, concerns, and ideas.” Nancy Ortberg was an emergency room nurse before becoming a minister and remembered a night at the end of her shift, when she was preparing to go home. The ER was a mess. The ER physician was debriefing a resident about procedures and protocols, complimenting the young resident on his competence. And then he put his hand on the resident’s arm and asked, “When you finished did you notice the young man from housekeeping who came in to clean the room?” There was a blank look on the young doctor’s face. “His name is Carlos. He’s been here for three years. He does a fabulous job. When he comes in he gets the room turned around so fast that you and I can get our next patients in quickly. His wife’s name is Maria. They have four children.” Then he named each child and their ages. “He lives in a rented house three blocks from here. They’ve been up from Mexico for about five years. His name is Carlos. Next week I would like you to tell me something about Carlos that I don’t already know. Okay? Now let’s go check on the rest of the patients” (*Forbes*, 23 April 2007).

May we always have the courage, faith and commitment to see and know those who are on the other side of our gates! Amen.