

Encountering the Stranger: Socio-economic Differences & the Cost of Ignorance

A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
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James 2:1-7, Luke 16:19-31

Today my Lenten sermon series on *Encountering the Stranger* continues with the fourth in a series—this one on encountering people of a different socio-economic class than we are, specifically those who live below the poverty line. The series, if you'll remember, was occasioned by the *Resolution on Violence* that our Session passed last April. That resolution challenges all of us, among other things, *to undertake actions consistent with breaking down the barriers between ourselves and persons who might be wrongly considered 'the other', such as engaging in conversation, or joining at table, or providing support to persons holding religious beliefs, and/or of ethnicities, and/or of nationalities other than our own.* Lent is a great time to take on the spiritual discipline of reaching out to and providing support to people we might think of as the other.

Our first passage is from the letter of James. In this particular passage, James speaks of how some in the early church engaged in preferential treatment for the wealthy at the expense of the poor. Listen for how that played out and what James has to say about all of that.

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favouritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Have a seat here, please', while to the one who is poor you say, 'Stand there', or, 'Sit at my feet', have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonoured the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

Our second passage is from the Gospel of Luke—it is the story of the rich man and Lazarus. Jesus tells this story in response to the Pharisees, whom Luke calls lovers of money, ridiculing him for saying no person can serve two masters—both God and wealth. As we reflect today on how we encounter others, particularly the poor, listen carefully for what the wealthy man does—and what happens after both of them die. When you hear the mention of Abraham, remember that it was he who was told in Genesis 12 that he was blessed in order to be a blessing.

'There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames." But Abraham said, "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us." He said, "Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house—for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment." Abraham replied,

“They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.” He said, “No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.” He said to him, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”’

I have to tell you that this is not my favorite story in the Bible, especially not since I moved to Northern Virginia.

That being said, I wonder about the rich man at the beginning of this story Jesus tells. The narrative provides us with only a few details. He wears the designer clothes of his day—purple and fine linen. I’d say he eats high on the hog, but given that pork wasn’t kosher, that’s probably not the most fitting expression, nevertheless he feasts every day. Other than that, we don’t know much about the rich man. Not even his name.

We do know that at his gate, there is a poor man. *A man who has a name. Lazarus.*

Lazarus is a form of the name Eleazar, which means “God has helped.” Which raises a question worth pondering, of course: exactly how did God help Lazarus? In this life anyway?

What we know about **Lazarus** is that he is poor and covered with sores, so maybe he is diseased, he’s leprous. We also know that he is hungry, and that he longs for—and presumably doesn’t receive—even the merest scraps that fall from the rich man’s table. He’s so bad off that dogs—dogs!—who probably do manage to get some scraps--come and lick his sores. It’s a very starkly drawn contrast.

I’ve always envisioned the rich man stepping over old Lazarus—Old Mr. “God has helped”—every day to get in and out of his house. The text doesn’t actually say that. But it does say that the poor man was there at his gate. So, unless the rich man had some sort of back door to his house, that rich man had to have seen Lazarus every day. And Lazarus, you would imagine, sees him.

But until they both die, we don’t know anything more about them. We don’t know, for instance, whether the rich man did his best *not to see* Lazarus, averting his eyes every time he passed by. We don’t know whether the rich man sucked his teeth and shook his head, thinking that Lazarus, Old Mr. God Has Helped, deserved his plight and thought to himself if only that poor fellow worked a little harder or had sinned a little less, he’d be in better shape. We don’t know whether the rich man assumed that somebody else was taking care of Lazarus, so it wasn’t really his problem. We don’t know whether he ever had a pang of guilt about the situation or whether he just considered Lazarus a public nuisance.

My colleague Brian Merritt, who works for a ministry in Chattanooga, TN called Mercy Junction and preaches at the Renaissance Presbyterian Church there, wrote back in January about how one of the homeless men in the city, a 49 year old man named Mendon John Price, or as they call him John John, was listed by the Chattanooga Convention and Visitors Bureau as—and this is a direct quote—*number one enemy downtown* because of his “aggressive panhandling.”¹ The police arrested John John for approaching people and asking for money.

¹ Rev. Brian Merritt, “Mercy Junction calls on Visitors Bureau to stop criminalizing the poor”, *Follow Love Be – Mercy Junction of Chattanooga* (Wordpress Blog), <https://followlovebe.wordpress.com/2016/01/26/mercy-junction-calls-on-visitors-bureau-to-stop-criminalizing-the-poor/>

This incensed Brian and the people in his church, where John-John comes to worship. They showed up at his court appearance and they issued a statement: “We know Mr. Price, who we call John John. We know him as a gentle, respectful, and kind person and besides that, a great harmonica player.”

Lazarus can be an inconvenience. But when you get to know him, it’s a different story.

Let me quickly add that I sympathize with Chattanooga Convention and Visitors Bureau. I mean, we’re a church. But we’ve had a man named George come to worship here every so often. You’ve probably met George at some point. When he comes, he always hits people up directly for a ride and for money—several of you have experienced that. Ours is not the only church he has frequented. He’s been banned from Judith’s church because he’s played so many people. George knows what he’s doing.

One of the last times he showed up I was preaching on Lazarus. I wonder if he has secret access to the bulletins here. George knows what he’s doing.

It’s all complicated, right? How best to really help someone. How best to handle your own charitable giving, our congregation’s benevolence budget, the economic priorities of local, state, and federal governments.

But maybe the key thing to remember in all of this is that the people we encounter and the people we try to avoid, or not to make eye contact with, all have names and they have stories. Some of them play a pretty darn good harmonica. They are children of God just as much as you and I are: the ones standing in long lines outside of Mt. Olivet Methodist on Glebe, the ones who hold signs by the side of the intersection, the ones who sit and jingle their cups on the streets of D.C. —they all have names and stories.

The story of Lazarus and the rich man is just the slightest bit terrifying for those of us who live in the zip codes around here, because we are aware that we are not Lazarus in this story and we know how the story continues. It doesn’t end well for the rich man.

After they both die, Lazarus is carried up by angels to be with Abraham. That’s a little curious, right? It doesn’t say the throne of God, or the arms of Jesus, or the gates of heaven to check in with St. Peter. I suppose the last two make sense, because Jesus is the one telling the story and Peter is in the crowd along with the Pharisees.

Anyway, Lazarus goes to be with Abraham, and the wealthy man goes down to be in the flames.

Why Abraham? Well, Abraham was the one who was the first patriarch, the father of the whole Israelite people. God made a covenant with Abraham to bless Abraham so that he and his descendants might be a blessing. That’s important.

I think Abraham is there in the story to remind every listener what is expected of those who have been blessed—with health, with wealth, with time and talent, with the knowledge of God’s love. You are blessed to be blessing. From those to whom much has been given, much will be expected. And the wealthy man forgot this. He seemed to forget it every day. At least when it came to Lazarus.

So from the underworld, the rich man calls out, “Father Abraham, send Lazarus to dip his finger in the water and cool my tongue.”

Now notice two things.

Number one, the rich man actually does know Lazarus' name. And number two, he's treating Lazarus—even in the afterlife—as if he is his own personal servant.

No wonder Abraham says a chasm has been fixed between the two of them. Just like Scrooge's partner Marley's chains were forged in his life on earth, so too was that chasm. Abraham says it can't be crossed. And we hate that.

Then the rich man says, "Send Lazarus to talk to my brothers to warn them." To that, Abraham replies, "They have the law and the prophets—if they won't listen to them, they won't listen even if a man comes back from the dead."

Now that's a thinly veiled reference to Jesus' resurrection—and perhaps to the resurrection of another Lazarus in the book of John.

I've come to understand something. I'm glad we have a resurrection, *but you don't need a resurrection* to see that we are fundamentally connected to and have a responsibility to care for the poor ones among us. All you have to do is read the Hebrew scriptures or listen to a few sermons. Listen to the dispatches from Mercy Junction in Chattanooga, Tennessee about a kind gentle man, who does indeed panhandle, but also plays a mighty good harmonica.

We don't need the resurrection to understand our connection to the poor ones among us. But the fact that we have it ought to give us more power and energy to do and be what we were created to do and be.

Susan Graceson started our worship service today by speaking about how beauty can draw us closer to God by helping us to reflect on the creator of that beauty. Part of the beauty in the world can be seen in the face of the poorest among us.

And they have **names** and **stories**.

In Jesus' name. Amen.