

Circle of Mercy Sermon
Luke 16:19-31 (The Rich Man and Lazarus)
Where Does it Hurt?
September 25, 2016

When Jesus begins any story or parable with the phrase, “there was a rich man who . . .” we already have a clue that we are not supposed to like this guy and that we need to pay close attention to what follows.

The rich man in today’s parable displayed his wealth in ostentatious ways. Within the first two verses we get a sense of who this rich man was and what he valued: he dressed in purple and fine linen – the most expensive kinds of cloth that could be purchased. These were the kinds of cloth and linen that priests reserved for holy occasions.

The rich man also “feasted sumptuously” every day. In other words, he had plenty to eat. He didn’t have to beg or wonder where his next meal would come from. He appeared to have extensive resources at his disposal. He could afford to be grandiose with the fine clothing with which he adorned his body and lavish in the meals he consumed.

In contrast, there was a poor man named Lazarus who lay at the rich man’s gate. I think we should take note here that Lazarus had something very important that the rich man didn’t have. Lazarus actually gets a name in this story. The rich man is never called by name. There is something very powerful in being called by name, in being known by name. You have known this in your life – times when you have been called by name – times when you have felt seen and known when someone else has called you by name.

When I moved to Atlanta for seminary. My grandmother had just died. I missed most of orientation, which was a time when people got to know each other, when the seeds of friendships were planted and began forming. When I arrived, I was swirling in a sea of grief and unfamiliar faces.

That first day, I was sitting outside eating lunch and professor Bill Mallard (who I only later learned had an uncanny gift of remembering everyone’s name) walked by me. We had met briefly only once, when I had visited campus several months earlier.

After he passed me, he turned around and walked back and said in his booming, friendly, always half-chuckling voice, “Well, hello there Missy Harris. Welcome back to Candler. You are from Sylva – how are things in Sylva?” I was taken off guard. He had no idea what the past week had held for me, and he surely had no idea what floodgates his greeting and simple question would open within me. It was in that moment I knew that I could stay there, that I was going to be okay.

I also thought about Anna’s graduation at the School of Math and Science this past year. The school refused to read out transgender students’ chosen names. As the students’ names were called and they walked toward the stage, the entire class raised their voices and called them out by name – their chosen name.

Being called by name matters.

Last week, I listened to an interview with Ruby Sales. Ruby Sales, as you may know, is an African American woman who was part of the Civil Rights Movement and continues to do racial justice work today. She participated in the marches from Selma to Montgomery in 1965. If you don't know who she is, you can (and should) read more about her.

What caught my attention in the interview that Krista Tippett did with her last week was this:

It happened when Ruby was getting her hair done. While her hairdresser was washing her hair, the hairdresser's daughter Shelly came into the shop. In Ruby's words, Shelly "had been hustling all night. And she had sores on her body, and she was just in a state. So something said to me, "Ask her, 'Where does it hurt?'" And I said, "Shelly, where does it hurt?" And just that simple question unleashed territory in her that she had never shared with her mother." It all unfolded right there in the middle of Shelly's mom's hair shop. It was probably messy and painful, but it was clear that Shelly needed to be asked this very question.

It was a moment when Shelly was really seen, a moment when someone stopped to notice her, rather than averting their eyes, pretending not to see. Ruby Sales looked directly at her in that moment and felt compelled to ask the simple question, "Where does it hurt?" Ruby didn't seem to jump to what she could do to make it better or fix it or give her advice. She simply, in some mysterious way paused long enough to see Shelly, to recognize the depth of her pain and agony – both physical and emotional – and to ask the simple but profound question, "Where does it hurt?" And she didn't just ask the question. She was willing to sit and listen to Shelly's answer.

Hearing Ruby's retelling of the story of her interaction with Shelly, with this parable of the rich man and Lazarus in the back of mind, I began to wonder, what if – what if the rich man had simply stopped, paused long enough to notice and to ask such a simple question to Lazarus, at his gate – Where does it hurt?

What would he have heard? What might it have opened up, not only for Lazarus, but for the rich man himself? What might the rich man have heard that he had not been able to see? What kept him from getting close enough? Would he have stuck around if he had gotten close enough to see the sores on Lazarus's body?

In this story, the only ones who got close enough to Lazarus to see him and touch him were the dogs, licking at his wounds.

The fact is we actually don't get much detail about any of the earthly interactions between this rich man and Lazarus. The basic facts that we do know are: what we just named about the lifestyle of the rich man; that Lazarus, who was located by the rich man's gate, was a poor man, covered in sores, who longed to satisfy his own hunger from what fell from the rich man's table. What is clear is that Lazarus recognized the rich man, but it doesn't seem like the rich man made the effort to notice Lazarus at all.

But the later part of this parable when we are whisked away to a life-after-death scene, it is clear that “the rich man knows Lazarus by name, and it is that knowledge that condemns him.”¹ He knew exactly who Lazarus was, and in this scene in Hades, the rich man called out to Abraham to have mercy upon him and “to send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool”² his tongue. Even in this scene of despair, when we think he might have gotten the message about his missteps in his life, the rich man still does not *fully* recognize Lazarus. He calls out for Lazarus to help him in the very way that he had failed to help Lazarus in his earthly life. Not once had he offered food from his own table to Lazarus who sat outside his gate.

Abraham chastised the rich man and told him that his despair and torment would not be relieved. The rich man then made a second request of Abraham: that he at least send Lazarus back to warn his five brothers about his fate so that they might avoid this place of despair and torment after their deaths. Again, the rich man, thinking only of himself, saw Lazarus as a means to an end – as a servant to be called upon to warn the rich man’s family about what they should try to avoid. The rich man still didn’t get it. He didn’t truly see or recognize Lazarus at any point in this story, thus sealing his fate. Abraham closed the conversation by telling the rich man: If your family does “not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”³

Part of me wonders what might have happened in this parable if Abraham or Lazarus had asked the rich man, “Where does it hurt?” but that’s another sermon for another day.

Amy-Jill Levine, professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies at Vanderbilt University, offers interpretations of Jesus’s parables that urge to try to hear the parables through the eyes and ears of the people in Jesus’s audience. Rather than moralizing or spiritualizing or post-reading the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus into every parable, what if we could hear this story as the people in the first century might have heard it?

Jesus had more to say about money than any other topic. The advice and warnings that he offered around wealth and riches were rooted in Hebrew scripture – the Torah and the prophets. The law and the prophets focused not on what we have, but what we do and how we are in relationship with each other – how we treat each other. Jesus’s first century audience would have known these teachings well, so this particular parable about the rich man and Lazarus would not have sounded strange to them. Of course, the rich man should have noticed Lazarus at his gate. They would have gotten the point.

They would have recognized the imperative to care for the poor, the widow, the sick and the orphan from Hebrew scripture. For example, “Deuteronomy 15:5 mandates, ‘If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns . . . do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor.’ Isaiah 58:7 taught: ‘Share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house’ . . .” and as Levine points out, the

¹ Levine, Amy-Jill, *Short Stories by Jesus*, (Harper Collins: New York, NY), 259.

² Luke 16:24 (NRSV).

³ Luke 16:31 (NRSV).

concern for almsgiving was part of the culture. So was love of neighbor. The problem is not the message; the problem is that people don't listen."⁴

It's likely that the rich man would have known all of these things. But he didn't listen.

The real problem is that people don't listen. Levine invites us to consider, "What if we took seriously Jesus's own concern for how people related to each other, or how they might live if they already had one foot in the kingdom of heaven?"⁵

What would it look like if we embodied the belief "that the doing of justice is part of God's involvement with humanity"⁶ that God's work in the world involves us and that when we fail to act justly, we fail to live fully into God's hope for the world. What would it really look like to live as if we already had one foot in the kingdom of heaven?

More than being a story about heaven and eternal reward or hell and eternal punishment this parable offers us the opportunity to recognize that we already know what God calls us to in the world. The real question is: Will we participate in and respond to God's invitation to be present in the world right here/right now? The world we live in is more than ready to give us reason to doubt God's presence. The message of the Empire comes to us loud and clear in every direction.

In the interview with Ruby Sales that I mentioned a few minutes ago, Ruby also speaks about the dangers inherent in the systems of the Empire (which, interestingly, much of the language about Empire that was present in original interview was removed for the edited/radio version).

Sales notes that the greatest weapon of the Empire is the destruction of intimacy, relationship, and connection.

- The Empire thrives when we buy into the lie that we are alienated, separated, and dependent upon no one but ourselves.
- The Empire thrives when we act out of a sense of scarcity rather than a sense of abundance.
- The Empire thrives when we are divided and seeking only to save ourselves.

We know that there is more than enough; that our well-being is intimately tied to the well-being of every other person and living thing on this planet. But the values and promises of the Empire seduce and persuade us to think and act otherwise.

Which brings me back to the central question – "Where does it hurt?" The Empire thrives when we fail to stop, notice each other, and ask the simple, but profound questions like, "Where does it hurt?" We need to ask this question, AND we have to wait and listen to the answer.

⁴ Levine, 270-271.

⁵ Levine, 251.

⁶ Levine, 254.

When we look at the news of just this past week, we see exactly where it hurts:

- It hurts in the cities of Tulsa and Charlotte where police officers shot and killed Terrence Crutcher and Keith Lamont Scott. We need to know and say their names.
- It hurts in New York and New Jersey where bombs were detonated.
- It hurts in the divisive and hateful rhetoric that saturates our political landscape – in every direction.
- It hurts in the faces of refugees fleeing lands filled with violence and fear.
- It hurts in Seattle in yet another act of gun violence.

And in those places where we find ourselves day in and day out that don't make the news:

- It hurts in the conversation with an undocumented person who says he feels invisible.
- It hurts in the brokenness of relationships with those whom we hold dear.
- It hurts in the questions about the world that our children have that we simply do not know how to answer.

It hurts. It hurts. It hurts.

What does it look like to be people of faith – rooted in things that we hope for, but which we have not yet seen – in the face of all of this pain and hurting?

What does it look like to be people of faith . . .

- When we know our tendencies to build up the gates around us – just like the gate of the rich man.
- When we know that we are seduced by and become victims of our own way of life.
- When we know our fears – the things that paralyze us and lead us to complicity and silence in systems that oppress – but we can't seem to overcome them.

What does it look like to be people who live with one foot planted in the kingdom of heaven?

- For one thing, when we attempt to plant one foot in the kingdom of heaven, we actually land right HERE with both of our feet planted firmly on this holy ground. It makes me think of the song *Gather Us In* that we often sing: “Not in the darkness of buildings confining, not in some heaven light years away, but here in THIS place a new light is shining, now is the kingdom, now is the day.”

- This is clear in the central prayer that Jesus taught the disciples to pray – “thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” The kingdom is here and now. It’s not something we need to go looking for. It’s all around us.
- As Barbara Brown Taylor aptly puts it: “I can set a little altar, in the world or in my heart. I can stop what I am doing long enough to see where I am, who I am there with, and how awesome the place is.... Human beings may separate things into as many piles as we wish—separating spirit from flesh, sacred from secular, church from world. But we should not be surprised when God does not recognize the distinctions we make between the two. Earth is so thick with divine possibility that it is a wonder we can walk anywhere without cracking our shins on altars.”

The truth is, responding to the hurt of the world will look different for each one of us, and we desperately need each other to attend to the world around us in a variety of ways.

- For some of us, it may mean showing up in the streets of Tulsa or Ferguson or Charlotte or Asheville to engage in protest around in the hurts of the world and our communities that have suffered too long, where black and brown bodies are seen as threats, to be feared.
- For some of us, it may mean showing up in our places of employment, to engage in the pain that people experience that will never be known to others.
- For some of us, it may mean helping our children learn to live in right relationship with their friends (and enemies).
- For some of us it may mean providing educational opportunities to others.
- For some of us it may mean caring for the physical and mental well-being of people who seek care from us.
- The list could go on and on and on ...

The common thread for all of us to is that we have to open our eyes and see, to pay attention, to notice, to show up, to call people by name wherever we find ourselves.

Just as the rich man knew, we already know what God calls us toward – right and just relationships that include keeping the practice of surrendering ourselves to knowing and being known, seeing and being seen at the center of all that we do.

Wherever and whenever we are able to get close enough to each other to ask “Where does it hurt?” the kingdom of God might very well start breaking out all around us, and we might have to borrow some shin guards, lest our shins be cracked open by all of the altars we stumble upon.

Amen.