

### “Who Are You?”

For almost three years from 2001-2004 I commuted of work five days a week from Fredericksburg to DC. After arriving at Union Station I took a Metro line to my stop to Farragut North. From there I walked a few blocks to my firm’s offices. Near the station there was a man who sat on the sidewalk. In the cold weather he had a blanket covering him with a paper cup exposed to collect money. He did not ask for money. Sometimes he shook the cup to make the coins clatter in order to get attention. Otherwise he was quiet.

As I walked to work sometimes I would put a few coins in the cup as I passed, as other commuters did. That was the extent of the contact. The more I saw him there the more I felt like that Jesus called me to something deeper with him. I made the decision one day to stop and greet him. Another time I asked his name and told him mine. Eventually I stood off to one side and tried to carry on a conversation. Sometimes, I sat with him and talked. I learned a little about his past and present life. Several times he asked me if I had an item of clothing or shoes that could give him. The belt I gave him seemed to be an improvement over the twine he was using, but the shoes ended up being a bit small.

I tell you this not to extoll myself, but because it was today’s gospel lesson that led me to take the chance to get to know this man. I did not try to save him. I did attempt to share. It was hard for me, because I had to get out of my comfort zone in order to befriend him. But unlike the rich man in today’s parable I could not keep stepping over him.

That is the crux of today’s parable. While some may take it as a condemnation of the wealthy it really isn’t. It is a condemnation of our ignoring the poverty and need all around us. The rich man’s sin is not wealth, or even that he does not share his wealth. It is so much more. He literally has to step over Lazarus to exit his property for Lazarus sits at his gate. He blissfully ignores Lazarus’ need, not even noticing that he is there and slowly dying while dogs lick his sores. The rich man not only does nothing for Lazarus, but he fails to recognize there is any need. Lazarus is simply like a piece of garbage that he needs to avoid as he goes upon his way.

The lack of care or respect that the rich man shows to Lazarus is not restricted to this life. In the afterlife when the rich man is confined to torment in Hades and Lazarus is comforted in the bosom of Abraham the rich man treats Lazarus no better than a servant. He does no address Lazarus but Abraham. Then he instructs Abraham to send Lazarus to give him a drop of water to ease his torment. Of course, this is something that he never did for Lazarus when Lazarus lived right outside his home. At this point Lazarus is prevented from easing the rich man’s torment by the chasm that separates Heaven and Hades.

When the rich man accepts Abraham’s explanation, he then instructs him to send Lazarus to his brothers to warn them to follow the law and prophets or risk the torment he is in. Once again Abraham speaks letting the rich man know that such a thing is useless. The more important point to my ear is that the rich man is still living in his own world where the poor are to serve him at his behest; that a man like Lazarus is not worth his time to help. He is refuse on the street in life and no better than an errand boy in the afterlife.

Perhaps there were some people that Jesus was trying to scare into doing the right thing with this description of an afterlife of torment for those who did not care for the poor. But I think that this parable is much more than the simple lesson of “Be good or you will burn in hell.” But Jesus’ parables are not simplistic or moralistic. His parables are subtle and tend to undercut societal norms. When we read them literally we are usually missing the point. The point of this parable also contradicts the casual interpretation of something Jesus says after his anointing by Mary, “You will always have the poor with you.” Which too many people take as license to ignore the poor.

The rich man’s sin is that he does not recognize Lazarus as a fellow human being worthy of respect and care. The rich man treated him no better than an obstacle or an inconvenience during his life. Other than dying in the street the man did not seem to make a nuisance of himself. In death (and by the way notice the differences of their deaths. Lazarus is carried to the bosom of Abraham, while the rich man is simply buried.) the rich man continues to treat Lazarus as lesser despite their dramatically juxtaposed situations where it is clear to us who is favored and who is not.

Whom do we step over, literally or metaphorically as we roam the tidy streets of Middleburg? Whose humanity do we overlook because their situation is inconvenient? Whose name do we fail to learn, because we do not think much of them? Our personal Lazarus’ may not be out in the street somewhere they may be sitting next to us in the pews or with us in line at the Safeway.

Each one of us in one way or another is struggling. The struggle may not be one for food and good health or something else obvious to the naked eye. The struggles many of us have are internal, or perhaps they only take place behind closed doors. But because it is easier to not probe too deeply or care too much, we let those stay hidden. Or worse, we vilify each other without taking the time to know the others pain. When we experience a harsh or out of proportion response to something we did, we often respond proportionally. Instead we could respond from a place of care asking, “Are you OK?” “Let’s sit down and have a coffee. I’m concerned about you.”

That makes us vulnerable. It may take us out of our comfort zone. We risk being rejected. But we are called into this life for two purposes, to love God and to love each other. When we do not see each other as people, when we are reactive instead of responsive, when we return evil for evil, then we have given up on one another and I think we are also saying that we have given up on God.

We are better than that. I think that is why we come here week after week. We try to learn how to look each other in the eye. We try to care for each other, especially those we find unsavory, unlikeable, or unworthy. My friends, that is exactly where we will find Christ, in the eyes, and sores, and names of those we wish we did not have to see. In their eyes is where our heart will be broken. In recognizing them a fellow children of God is where our own healing begins.