

**Who is At Our Gate?
Luke 16:19-31
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I have always been a fan a folk music. Songs like “This Land is Your Land” and “If I Had a Hammer” have become hymns of the social justice movement that we have sung for years and continue to sing. I once read a quote by the great Woody Guthrie that said “My job as a folk singer is to comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable.”

I thought, that is going to make a great lead in to a sermon someday, and is that not the role of the preacher too – to comfort the disturbed and to disturb the comfortable.

However, as I read this passage in Luke, I realized that it has nothing to do with me. Jesus is the one, with this parable, that is comforting and siding with those disturbed by poverty and oppression and we all are the ones being disturbed by Jesus as he confronts us with our comfort and privilege.

The parable of The Rich Man and Lazarus begins with Jesus describing the rich man as dressed in purple and fine linen, feasting sumptuously every day. He lives in a gated house. As one commentator notes, he is part of a real trend in the first century of conspicuous consumption as the Pax Romana brought unprecedented disposable income to the Roman upper crust. Today they would be called the 1%.

In contrast Lazarus lives at the gate of the rich man. They are in such close proximity but the rich man doesn’t even notice or interact with Lazarus. Lazarus is invisible to him.

While the rich man is covered in fine linen, Lazarus is covered in sores. He is weak, sick and starving. His hunger would be satisfied with what dropped from the table of the rich man. Without even changing his eating habits he could have made Lazarus full.

As the story goes on, Lazarus dies and is carried to the arms of Abraham by angels. The rich man dies, is buried and ends up tormented in Hades. The chasm that was between them continues but their positions are reversed. Yet, even though the rich man is being tormented for the lack of attention to poor Lazarus he is still steeped in his sense of privilege. He actually, upon seeing Lazarus in the arms of Abraham, asks Abraham to have Lazarus fetch him some water. He doesn’t even address Lazarus directly but in the third person.

But, Abraham sets him straight, and reminds him of his lavish lifestyle and Lazarus’ suffering. Now it is Lazarus that receives all that is good and he and the rich man are permanently separated by the chasm of the rich man’s making. He is not separated from Lazarus but he is separated from God.

But the rich man isn’t done, still speaking from a place of privilege, he now wants the poor man to do his bidding by going to warn his brothers of their selfish ways so they will not meet his same fate. Abraham sets the rich man straight again telling him that his brothers have all they need to know the right way to live in the lessons of the law and the prophets. Just as the rich man had all he needed to lead him in the right direction but chose to ignore it.

Let's look closer at the 2 characters in this story, do you notice that the rich man has no name? We would assume that he would have enough real estate, wealth and status to be named. But he is not. The rich man in the eyes of the story teller is, as one commentator puts it a nobody. Lazarus, in contrast, is very much a somebody. He is named and known by Jesus and Jesus is empathetic to his sick and impoverished condition. By naming Lazarus, Luke forces us to look at him in the eyes and see him as human.

This parable had a radical message in Jesus' time and for us today. Biblical commentators have much to say –

Nancy Lynne Westfield writes “God is on the side of the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized. God judges those with means, wealth, privilege and social status who ignore the poor and who make invisible the voiceless, marginalized and minoritized....The interconnectedness of our social existence is profound. Those with wealth are cautioned to end their isolation from the poor and develop ways to work with and on behalf of the poor or risk torment.”

Another writes that “This text presents us with the great moral challenge of seeing and then making visible, the invisible suffering of the world. Indeed, it may be one of the most important challenges of today...

We live within political and economic systems that feed upon the sufferings of others while keeping those sufferings invisible. The call of Christ is to refuse to live any longer by those convenient fabrications.”

Those are strong words and quite an indictment of our current society. Let's take a look at where we are today. Who is sitting at our gate waiting to be seen and what role have we played putting them there?

We have talked recently about issues such as immigration and migrants at the border, gun violence, the environment and of course poverty. They are all rooted in money – the sin of greed.

It's no secret that in our country homelessness and income inequality is on the rise. In fact it is at its highest level in 50 years. CEO salaries are rising while workers' salaries and benefits are being cut. Recent tax cuts for the wealthiest are now expected to be paid for by the poorest and most in need – women, children, the elderly and our veterans – with proposed cuts to SNAP, social security and Medicare and Medicaid. The invisible poor sitting at our gate.

Gun violence is also at an all time high. The right to own high powered assault weapons and the ability for gun makers to make and sell and earn higher profits is seen as a greater than our children's right to go to school or a movie, a concert or church without fear of dying. Kindergartners are getting suckers for not crying during an active shooter drill and students are being taught to silence a sneeze, because if you sneeze you die. Profits over people – over our children.

The innocents wanting safety and security sitting at our gate.

We are in the midst of a climate crisis. The Amazon Rainforest is burning, sea levels are rising, our atmosphere – the very air we breathe – is contaminated and eroding.

We are on the verge of a mass extinction. All for the sake of money.

Fossil fuels are literally killing us but our government will not join the rest of the world in moving to reduce them.

Who is leading the fight to save our planet? Our youth.

It's their future that is at stake, their home that is at stake. They are sacrificing their childhoods to do the work of adults.

Our children straining to be heard, God's very creation, sitting at our gate.

And finally, the devastating announcement that the number of refugees allowed to resettle in the U.S. in the coming year will be cut nearly in half to 18,000. The limit represents the lowest number of refugees seeking protection from violence or political persecution allowed in the country since the modern refugee program was established in 1980 according to NPR. It is an 80% drop since 2016.

Migrants coming from Central America to flee violence and poverty are put in detention centers and separated from their children. The irony is they are fleeing unstable countries that the United States had a hand in destabilizing through the support of dictators that put profits from cash crops and support of wealthy land owners over the poor.

Refugees and migrants languishing at our gate.

In our text today, Jesus calls us to see those at our gate, really see them and hear their stories and invite them in to sit at our table and participate in healing the chasm between us. It reflects Luke's relentless concern for the faithful stewardship of goods.

We are not told not to make money. It's how we make our money, at whose expense we are acquiring our wealth that is in question and how we share our wealth to lift up others.

To do this we must be willing to be transformed from looking at what benefits us only to what benefits the whole community. Abraham's words suggest that stepping out of our privilege is perhaps the most difficult journey of transformation.

Remember the quote of Woody Guthrie about being a folk singer ...it's also the role of the text, the words of Abraham and Jesus are to comfort the disturbed and to disturb the comfortable. That's us.

We need to look at our personal priorities and way of living and spending our money, at our priorities as a church, as a community and as a nation.

Do we live our lives in a way that is generous, that serves God and others or do we only live for ourselves and our own comfort?

In a culture that not only encourages self - indulgence and personal wealth over community well being but stokes fear of others trying to take if from us, it can be a challenge to hear God's voice, the voice that shows how to be close to God by being close to and serving one another. But we have everything we need to show us the way.

God has broken through and shown us how to close the chasm with the words of the prophets and words and life of Christ. It is up to us to listen and follow.

Amen.