

EZEKIEL 37:1-14

PSALM 130

ROMANS 8:6-11

JOHN 11:1-45

Sermon for March 29, 2020

TO OPEN THE EYES OF THE BLIND

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

There are two individuals called by the name of Lazarus in the gospel accounts. The first is a man who figures in one of Christ's parables in the gospel of Luke, the one we often refer to as the parable of Lazarus and the rich man. The other is in the gospel of John, where he appears as the brother of the sisters Martha and Mary.

You will all remember the story of Lazarus and the rich man. Lazarus is a beggar, and the rich man leads a self-centered and opulent life style. At a certain point, however, they both are dead, and we find Lazarus now in heaven and the rich man in an awful place called Hades in the Greek text. The bulk of the parable consists of a conversation between Abraham, seated with Lazarus on the heavenly side of a gulf, and the rich man, who is living in fiery torment on the other.

There have been many different interpretations given of this parable. I suppose the commonest throughout the history of Christianity has been to take it literally, as a picture of two different fates after death, eternal heavenly bliss, on the one hand, and eternal terrible torment, on the other, with an impassible chasm between them.

In this church, we don't preach or believe in a place of eternal conscious torment after physical death, so obviously we would reject any of those interpretations. But there is one element of the parable, I believe, that almost everyone can agree on, wherever you stand on the possibility of eternal hell.

I think we might all agree that the parable contrasts two different kinds of life, and makes it clear that the type of life led by the rich man represents a life that is very much out of keeping with God's will, and emphasizes that the rich man always had opportunity to set out on a different path, to lead a different sort of life, but that those opportunities must necessarily, at a certain point, come to an end.

So what sort of life does the rich man in the parable represent? It's important to note that in the parable, the rich man isn't described as being at fault for poor Lazarus' situation, and he's not described as positively mistreating him in any way. The way the parable presents the situation, the rich man is simply oblivious to Lazarus, oblivious to him begging at the gate, or even scrounging for the scraps of bread that are thrown from the man's table. (That sounds like an odd situation to our modern ears, but in the Middle East at that time, pieces of bread were used to wipe one's hands like a napkin, and then discarded on the floor for the servants or anyone one else to eat.)

In other words, what the parable is drawing our attention to is a kind of blindness, the blindness of the rich man to the situation of someone else.

And reading the parable that way makes sense of its conclusion. The rich man pleads with Abraham to send Lazarus, perhaps in a vision, to his still living five brothers so that they might repent from their ways, and Abraham tells them that even if Lazarus came back from the dead for them, they still wouldn't change their ways. In other words, the parable is teaching us about the depth of the blindness, the obliviousness, from which the rich man and his brothers suffer, a spiritual blindness so profound that virtually nothing, not even miraculous proof, could free them from it.

Keeping that in mind, we turn to the story of Lazarus we find in the eleventh chapter of John's gospel, our reading for today.

The miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead isn't mentioned by any of the other gospel writers, and that seems strange, especially since John himself tells us that that particular miracle was the direct cause of the final persecution of Christ. A few verses after recounting the parable, John tells us about the priests and Pharisees in Jerusalem hearing about and discussing the miracle, deciding that sacrificing Jesus would be for the good of the nation. "From that day on," John writes, "they plotted to put him to death." (11: 53)

That, along with the remarkable coincidence that the Lazarus raised from the dead shares the same name with the character in the parable – the only character, by the way, to receive an actual name in any of the many parables of Jesus – has led many, including myself, to believe that John may have created or at least based this account on the parable, and intended it to provide a vivid illustration of the moral of the parable, the moral we've already mentioned, that human blindness to the message of repentance is so firmly entrenched that not even a miracle of resurrection could lift that blindness.

But whether it's at least in part a creation of the writer of John's gospel, or whether it's actually a separate incident that makes the same point, the point itself is what's important, and one that invites self-reflection in so many ways. For don't we all suffer from blindness of various kinds?

There's a fellow who walks around Albion a lot; most of you have probably noticed him from time to time. He's big, hefty guy with long dirty blonde hair. He looks sort of like Prince Valiant gone to seed. Think Nick Nolte. This guy's always alone, and just seems to be wandering around, killing time. I've run into him in line at Burger King and in the Main Street Thrift store, which I'm guessing are probably just two of his regular stops around town. When he's in a location like that, he's always talking nonstop, making sort of gruffly friendly remarks to whoever is around, although like I said, he himself is always alone.

The sense I've always had of him is that's he's probably some hapless, jobless welfare hanger-on, just a little off kilter although not dangerous, probably living in a Section 8 apartment, who spends his days wandering around town making everyone a little uncomfortable when he's around, and his nights watching TV by himself. Someone who nurses a cup of coffee at Crosby's for an hour, then wanders to the library to use their computers for the rest of the afternoon. You get the picture? A life loser, a poor Schmoie.

So you can imagine my surprise a few weeks ago. It was right at the beginning of the virus quarantine, and the Red Cross was putting out a desperate call for blood donors. I hadn't given in a while, so I made an appointment to be almost first in line. They were using the bloodmobile parked in the Arnold Gregory parking lot, and they were only taking in two donors at a time. I was the third, and then a fourth came in after me.

I finished giving my blood, and when I stepped out of the bloodmobile, you can guess, I'm sure, who was the one person in the parking lot, waiting to get in.

Right. Joe Schmoe, Prince Valiant, the hapless loser. And I felt like that blind man must have felt when Jesus put spittle on his eyes, then told him to look around.

From now on, wherever I see this man walking around town, I'm not going to see some emotionally and socially disabled piece of societal driftwood; I'm going to see a man standing all alone in a parking lot, bareheaded despite the cold drizzly rain, waiting to give his life's blood to benefit somebody he'd never meet, who'd never even know his name.

What led me to take that original attitude towards this fellow? My judgementalism. My condescension. My self-satisfaction. My lack of sympathy. My extraordinary good fortune in life. Exactly the same qualities as the rich man in the parable.

In a word, my spiritual blindness.

The gospels tell us that Jesus performed countless miracles of physical healing during his short ministry, but the ones we're actually given details about are almost all about two things: enabling the crippled to walk, and enabling the blind to see. And surely this is no accident.

Seeing and walking are the two central elements of the Christian life, and both are equally necessary. If we can walk but cannot see, then we blunder about aimlessly; if we can see but cannot walk, we are left with simply being a witness, a camera, a handicapped point of view.

And the exact same thing is true of following Christ. If we cannot see, we cannot see to follow. If we cannot walk, we can only watch Christ receding into the distance.

In our reading for today from John's gospel, when Jesus had first been informed of the death of Lazarus, his disciples urge him to remain safe in Galilee. And what does Jesus say to them?

*Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of the world. But if one walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.* (11: 9-10)

Over and over again, in a hundred different pictures and lessons, Jesus teaches the same thing: Open your eyes, follow me.

In the very first chapter of John's gospel, when Jesus is gathering his first followers, two of John the Baptist's disciples become intrigued with Jesus, and ask him where he's staying, and Jesus says: "Come, and see." (v. 39). And just a short time after, another potential disciple, Nathaniel, asks Phillip, already a follower, how could anything good come out of Nazareth, and Phillip says the same to him: Come and see. (46)

Seeing, walking, coming, seeing: these are inextricably intertwined in the Christian life. In the twelfth chapter of John's gospel, after telling us about the miracle of Lazarus, John quotes Jesus telling the people, the skeptical crowd: *A little while longer the light is with you. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you; he who walks in darkness does not know where he is going. While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become children of light.* (35-36)

But that is immediately followed by this terrible acknowledgment:

*But although He had done so many signs before them, they did not believe in him.* (37)

All of us – yours truly first and foremost – are stumbling through life more or less blind, blind to the gracious gifts with which we've been provided, blind to our own ignorance of others, blind to the reality that our time is limited. There are needs of our own which we ignore as blithely as the rich man ignored Lazarus. When we sow discord instead of peace into the world, we are revealing our own ignorance of God's will; when we pat ourselves on the back, we reveal our own ignorance of where we truly stand in God's own revelation; when we engage in moral judgementalism, we show our ignorance of the mercy God has shown to each of us; when we refuse to forgive, we reveal our own blindness to Christ on the cross. When we engage in malicious gossip, indifference to the suffering of others, hatred towards our enemies, and self-satisfaction with our own goodness, we are revealing a blindness and hardness of heart exactly as obstinate as those Pharisees who wouldn't repent, even when they saw Lazarus raised from the dead.

And so let's pray this morning for a cure for our blindness. Jesus asks us what we want, and our answer is that we want to see. We want to see, first, that we are blind, and then to see ourselves as we truly are, and our world as it truly is. We ask for faith in the miracle of Christ's resurrection, for the gift of repentance, and for the sustaining guidance of Christ's own spirit, and we ask all these things in his name.