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Luke 16.19-31

Here's a quick thought exercise. I'm not going to make you write your answers down or raise your hand or reveal it to your pewmate, just think for a minute...

When was the last time you did something really nice for someone else? Not something that you got paid for or was expected of you by virtue of your job or position.

For some of you, this is an easy exercise. For a few of you, this might require a little thought.

Still going: When was the last time you did something nice for someone else for completely (or almost completely) selfless reasons. That is, you didn't expect anything in return, you weren't trying to save face, return a favor or make yourself look good. Your act was simply compassionate, kind, helpful. When was that? Think hard.

Okay, take it a step further: when was the last time you did something nice for someone that isn't related to you? Hmm... you might have to think a little harder, huh?

Last one: When was the last time you did something like that for a stranger, someone very different from you, someone from whom you not only expected nothing in return but from whom you know could not give you anything in return?

Some of us here can think of those acts pretty quickly. Most of us can't. For most of us, sharing of ourselves, our time, talent and treasure, without expectation, without strings, is difficult. It is in our nature to take care of ourselves, to keep our resources safe, to expend our energy to benefit ourselves and our loved ones. On a human level, it makes sense.

On a heavenly level, it doesn't really.

Our Gospel this morning is often read as an anti-wealth message. And that is a fair reading. A very fair and accurate reading, to be honest. But you've likely heard that reading and you've likely heard it from me, so I'm going to try something else this morning instead.

Another look at the story of Lazarus the beggar and the Rich Man is that it is an anti-isolationist message. That is: Check out what happens to our friend the rich man when he thinks that his skin is the only skin worth saving. Check out the response when he chooses his stuff, his power, his wealth, his status over relationships. Check out what happens when he decides to make sure

that his boat is the biggest, most important yacht on the lake rather than using his resources to raise other boats alongside him.

Lonely down there in Hades isn't it?

It is easy to see what Lazarus needs. Lazarus needs food. He needs medical attention. He needs a safe place to live. But in addition to that, he needs, as all people need, to be noticed. To be spoken to with compassion, to be looked at with interest, to be *known*. Lazarus' physical needs are great, overwhelming even, but his emotional needs are also great, as we know, man cannot live on bread alone.

The unnamed rich man in our parable has riches for the sake of having riches. And the riches he has are inconsequential at best. He is insensitive to the needs of others around him and his is insensitive to his own need of those others. He is not only missing the opportunity to have his life enriched by meeting and getting to know a new person, he is missing the opportunity to fill his heart by practicing generosity, missing the experience of seeing God in the face of the other.

His straits, as we learn, are even more dire than Lazarus'. Lazarus is acutely aware of his dependence on others. The rich man is living under the illusion that he is self-sufficient, that his treasure is enough, that sharing it or himself will make him worth less. He is under the misguided impression that he does not need Lazarus as much as Lazarus needs him. He is too proud to accept a beggar as a brother.

So while the parable of Lazarus and the rich man is certainly a warning against excessive and ostentatious wealth, it is also a clarion call reminding us that being in relationship with one another is not just a nice idea, it is vital to our own well being, in the here and in the beyond.

The chasm that Lazarus and the rich man experience is something otherworldly, but the chasm we have here is altogether man-made. When we talk about economic disparity, we are indeed talking about money, hard to deny it. But we are also talking about broken relationship. Relationship with each other and relationship with God, the one who created us, who loves us and wants good things for ALL of us. And, I think, wants all of us to contribute to those good things.

Friends, we have been warned. We have been poked and prodded, we have been cajoled, begged. We have been given parables and we have been given direct orders. Using our resources, our power, our wealth, our education, our time, our talents, to help bring others up isn't just a nice idea. It is proverb and parable. It is Gospel. Closing the gap isn't just good for our economy, it is good for our souls.

God can be found anywhere, I believe that. But I also believe that God is most commonly found between two people. God is in first meetings and intense conversations. God is in reconciliation and forgiveness. God is in helping up and helping out. Wherever two or three are gathered, God is with us.

Do you want to experience God? Then experience humanity. The more you admit that self-reliance is just not the whole of human experience, the more you will open the eyes of your heart to see God at work all around you. Lazarus needed what the rich man wasn't willing to give. But the rich man wasn't even willing to admit he needed Lazarus.

The Hades that the rich man lived in was one of his own creating. Success, power, wealth and status are miserable if not used for good, to lift up, empower, feed and clothe others. This is more than just doing something nice for someone else but, it is a good place to start. Do something nice for someone that can't or won't repay you. Do something genuine for someone with no anticipation of return. Use the treasure you have—and we all have treasure—to give a gift to someone else and see how your heart is changed.

So go out.

Help a neighbor.

Love a neighbor.

Admit your need of your neighbor.

See God in your neighbor.