

September 25, 2022

The 16th Sunday after Pentecost

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It was 1962 when Bob Dylan wrote and introduced his new song, *Blowin' in the Wind*. He had no idea then of how iconic or relevant the song would become. Originally written not as a protest song, but as something to be said by somebody, for somebody, the song poses a series of elemental questions about humankind, always with the same refrain: 'The answer is blowin' in the wind. Found in the second verse of the song are two questions we are still asking today:

“How many years can some people exist before they're allowed to be free?”, and

“How many times can a man turn his head and pretend that he just doesn't see?”

We go about our days, and as we do, we gaze around to soak in the beauty we see— of the sky and sun, trees and flowers, the birds and even the spiders. Pumpkins of all colors and sorts have begun to fill our local landscape as we welcome the change of seasons. Our powers of observation are keen for changes in flora and fauna, or the timber of the air, yet as Jesus often notes with his disciples — when it comes to recognizing the suffering and plight of our neighbors, we can lack clear vision. Sometimes we fail to see.

Today's parable tells the story of two men that couldn't be more different in their lived experience. One wealthy, one poor; one in dire need, while the other wants for nothing. The rich man is gilded in royal colors, and by all counts, moves about in society with great freedom and privilege, while at his gate lies Lazarus - a man whose body, mind and spirit are so compromised that he is trapped in his existence. A great chasm exists between them. It seems the rich man was clueless to the importance of building community and connections, at least those outside his gate. I wonder how in death he knew Lazarus' name and in life he seemed unaware of Lazarus or his need? Maybe in his abundance he was comfortably ignorant, unaware of Lazarus' plight? Perhaps he had walked by, not even noticing him, or had seen him but then turned and gone on his way? Beyond the obvious disparities between rich or poor, this parable asks us to consider what happens when one cannot, or chooses not to see, or respond to the needs of one's neighbors. It calls us to reflect on what it means to see, and then to act.

In his mortal life, the rich man fails to notice or help Lazarus. And then, as we all do, both men die. It is in this moment in the story that the tables are turned. The rich man is buried, and then surprisingly finds himself suffering in the heat of Hades. Perhaps just as surprising, upon his death Lazarus is carried by Angels into the Arms of Abraham — where he is comforted and fed. In this poignant reversal of fortunes, each man receives something other than what they had borne on earth. We can hear the words of Isaiah recited by Jesus in the temple, which proclaim that the haughty will be laid low, and the lowly raised up. The one deemed by society as “other”, who suffered greatly was comforted and restored, while the other who knew only in abundance life, now suffers. While it might appear that the rich man is being punished because he of his wealthy, while Lazarus is rewarded because of his poverty, we must avoid the absolutes of dualism: What we see here is God's restorative justice in action, the fulfillment of God's promise to care for those on the margins, and a reminder that we all are called, mandated, to participate in that care.

The image of Lazarus is not foreign to us. Many of us have seen our poor, sick, or displaced neighbors outside the doors of our shops or begging on our local street corners. Both of these places make the fostering of relationship challenging at best. Perhaps we've been overcome by

what we have seen and turned our heads, wishing it were not so. Or maybe there have been times when so consumed in our own thoughts, we failed to notice the beggar at all. Bringing it closer to home, several of our members gather monthly to prepare a hot meal for our homeless brothers. Some will join them for dinner—a chance to go beyond the service of a meal, and to get to know them in their humanity, not just by their condition.

To open ourselves up to an invitation such as this, Jesus calls us first to self-examination: to consider carefully where the planks in our eyes or our blind spots have caused us to fail to see and love others fully. Do we have assumptions about the world and people's place in it that inform our responses — that might inadvertently keep us from extending our love or care to someone in need?

In his book, *If God is Love, Don't be a Jerk*, writer and pastor John Pavlovitz advises that, “We have to do the painful exploratory work of seeing into the depths of our own souls, where we must confront the gap between what we profess, and what we do. This is how we restore ourselves to God, and to one another.”

Out of our baptismal waters we have been called to seek justice, act kindly and to show love and mercy to one another; to embody God's way of love and vision for the beloved community. The rich man was unable or unwilling to capture this vision in life and hoped his brothers might be open to a shift in their perspective. He wanted Lazarus to warn his brothers, hoping they would believe someone raised from the dead. He wished they could be encouraged to bridge the chasm they had been conditioned to ignore and to begin seeing the anguish, needs, and pain of those in their midst.

To bridge the chasms between us and our neighbors, we need to get back to basics. This means first and foremost, returning to the great commandment: to love God with the whole of our being, and next, to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. “The way we treat people is the only meaningful expression of what we believe — it is what we profess on full display, what Jesus would call “bearing fruit.” Again and again, God calls upon us to turn and return to relationship with God, in repentance, through prayer, by reading God's word, and in action, so that we might be bearers of good fruit in the world.

But to be able to love others well and to allow them to be free, we also must be willing to open our eyes and to bear witness to what we see. By Jesus' example, we have watched as people who are seen and valued, are healed. And so, he teaches us, we must be willing to draw near and get in closer proximity to those in need. For Proximity is a great teacher. It give perspect, and can remove the distance that too easily allows us to turn and walk the other way.

Jesus doesn't tell us what kept the rich man from tending to his neighbor, yet we all know that we can easily fall prey to things that draw us away from God. Temptation and distraction are real, and can cause our attention and actions to become more self-focused than others-focused. Although we try hard to be the good and faithful people that our faith demands, we can succumb to complacency or avoidance. And sometimes, the needs of the world and their demand for our attention and resources can overwhelm us. Even if we do not intend it, we may find ourselves turning our heads, looking the other way, hoping the problems might go away, praying that someone else helps.

Jesus calls us to open our eyes sufficiently so that we might see God in one another— so that we might see our common humanity, and might be able to meet the suffering we see with a tangible, visible and generous love. The psalmist reminds us that we are beloved by a God who sees us, protects us, and comforts us, especially when we are suffering. The invitation is simple: to strive to

love God with all our heart and mind and body and soul, as best we can, to receive God's love in return and then to share it. Such care, Paul tells us, is expressed in righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness, is more than sufficient to alleviate our suffering, and to bring forth a world where every one of us as a child of Abraham will be received, embraced, and healed.

Still, questions may remain. We may wonder, how long? How long must people suffer? How long will the disparities between the haves and the have nots remain? When, instead of turning their heads and pretending they just don't see, will people find the courage to acknowledge those who suffer, whatever the cause, and extend their hands and hearts in love?

The answers aren't fleeting. They aren't blowing in the wind, but Jesus would say, are as obvious as the wind, if only we would see. The answers are found in God — In our God who is ever faithful, who meets us in our suffering and anguish, who restores us to wholeness, and who provides all we need to be agents of love in the world.

Perhaps a place we can begin is by offering a prayer for New Sight — calling upon God for all that we might need, so that we might see with fresh eyes. Let us pray:

*God of the ignored,
God of the invisible,
Whose Divine gaze rests on all alike,
Who sees what we cannot, or dare not see.
Who cares for those for whom we care not.
Who loves those whom we love not.
Open our eyes, unstop our ears, move our hearts, that we may with boldness and courage see the face of the
Divine in the mighty and the lowly, the exalted and the excluded; for the honor of your holy name. Amen.*

(Bishop Deon Johnson, Diocese of Missouri 9.22)

