

Letting Our lights Shine
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz
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Last spring Dana and I took members of our youth group on a mission trip to DC. We had the opportunity to listen to a speaker named Allen Banks tell us about his experience of homelessness. He began by addressing stereotypes. Allen asked our youth and the youth group from Connecticut with whom we shared the Church of the Epiphany that week to list reasons why people are homeless in the first place. There was hesitation at first, but we came up with stereotypical reasons: addiction to alcohol and drugs, crimes committed, mental illness, lack of education, and, well, laziness.

Allen provided the facts—the top two causes of homelessness in our country are lack of affordable housing and the inability to make a living on minimum wage. In DC for example the minimum wage is \$8.25, and you would have to work 108 hours a week at your minimum wage job in order to afford to rent a one bedroom apartment in the city.[1] That whole lazy stereotype is really not true either, 40% of homeless people do work day labor and minimum wage jobs.[2]

Allen told us that one of the hardest aspects of being homeless is feeling dehumanized. You have to find a safe place to sleep, to shower, food to eat, and a place to stay during the day and night. You constantly feel unwanted and unwelcome. All that time you are trying to survive, people walk by you avoiding eye contact, acting as if you don't exist at all, acting like they can see right through you, acting like you don't matter. It's that psychological level of homelessness that cuts deep, sometimes deeper than the mere survival aspects of your daily existence.

Allen's story is unfortunately not that unique, and it's not even solely modern. This is exactly what we see in Jesus' story about the rich man and Lazarus. Jesus sets the scene—there is a rich man, dressed in purple and fine linen, and he feasts sumptuously every day. And then there's Lazarus at the gate, covered in sores, just wanting to eat the scraps from the rich man's table.[3] Lazarus is hanging out with the dogs who lick his sores, the dogs he would probably have to fight off for those table scraps, the dogs being the only creatures who acknowledge his existence. Both men die. Lazarus ends up in heaven and the rich man ends up in hell, not an especially happy story.

There are a couple of interesting aspects though. First of all, Luke presents this tale with a complete reversal of the status quo. Typically a poor man lying at your gate would be nameless, he would have no identity, no one would care who he is. But this time, in this story, the poor man has a name. He is Lazarus. The rich man is the one whose name we don't even know. Moreover, even when the rich man is in hell he's trying to order people around. He asks Abraham to go warn his brothers, he asks Lazarus to get him some water; these flames are sure making me thirsty. No one heeds his orders, no one meets his demands, but these commands show his level of privilege. He still thinks he can order around servants to do his bidding even in hell.

Now Luke describes Jesus' ministry as bringing good news to the poor, and there are parts of Luke where his concern for the poor ends up implying a corresponding hostility for the rich. Luke says that God will provide the hungry with good things, but will send the rich away empty; the poor are blessed, the rich are doomed.[4] Last week we heard Luke record Jesus saying that you cannot serve God and wealth. But today is the harshest story of all, the story of a rich man in hell and Lazarus, the poor man named and claimed by God, in heaven.

You know what would have completely changed this story? If the rich man had actually taken a break from his feasting, gone out to his front gate, and invited Lazarus to come on in for dinner. And let me give you clean clothes while I'm at it. And do you want to take a bath before we eat? Do you need a doctor to look at those sores? Do you have a place to sleep tonight? With great power comes great responsibility.

One of the moments I was most proud of our youth on that mission trip to DC was when we prepared a meal at the church for dozens of homeless men and women. We got assigned our stations, we chopped and cooked and cleaned and set up tables and put out games to play and made popcorn and lemonade as an appetizer to welcome our guests to the church basement.

We greeted our guests, sat down with them at table, and had simple conversations—we just talked, and it allowed all of us to be seen and known and named and loved by God and one another. Looking around that room and seeing the youth of our church engaged in these personal conversations and discovering commonalities with our guests was frankly one of the best moments of my ministry at Pilgrim so far. And what made Dana and I so happy was that our personal meal in that church basement ended up being one of their favorite nights on the whole trip—to be together, to make a meal, and to sit with our guests and have a conversation, to see and be seen by one another.

Most of us don't want to be like the rich man who never even acknowledged Lazarus at his gate. And we have opportunities to serve and acknowledge the humanity of our neighbors, to make them feel known and loved by God. Every month we have the chance to serve at Bristol Lodge Soup Kitchen in Waltham—it's not the easiest time of day or day of the week, but it's a way to prepare a meal for those Lazaruses who live close by. It's a tangible way to acknowledge the divine spark in one another.

So Lazarus is named, the rich man is not. Lazarus ends up in heaven, the rich man does not. In contrast Lazarus' tale and even the formative experience our youth had in DC not long ago with a homeless man in Cleveland I remember distinctly from my childhood. You have to understand that the Cleveland Browns, as much as I love them, are often painful to watch, especially when you have season tickets like my family did for years. But there was awhile there that every game my dad and grandpa would take me to, the Browns would actually win. My grandpa deemed me the Browns' lucky charm, so I got to go to games with them all the time.

Missing kickoff is a cardinal sin in my family and we would have to descend flight after flight of stairs to get down to the old Municipal Stadium, right on the shores of Lake Erie. Following after my grandpa who's six four and was a scout in the Army wasn't easy, and I tended to get easily distracted by a homeless man I came to love. Every game there was a homeless man with one leg who would prop himself up on the railings in the middle of these flights of stairs, and he would play his saxophone as the crowds filed down into the stadium. I always wanted to listen more, he was so good—but we couldn't miss kick-off and my dad didn't want me to get crushed by the crowds behind us, so he would hurry me along past the man. Browns fans loved him, even the Cleveland Police never bothered him; he was there every Sunday without fail playing his saxophone.

I remember him and his music so vividly, and I regret that I never took the time or had the courage to just say hello and ask his name. As much as I came to identify that homeless saxophone player with game day, I never took that next step, of somehow, someday truly acknowledging him.

It may seem like Jesus is asking a lot of us today, there are a lot of Lazaruses in our midst after all. But I think Jesus is asking us to recognize God in one another, and to recognize God especially in the lost and the least. To recognize the divine light in people who may not be able to see it or feel it in themselves. It's our job as followers of Jesus to see the light and help others tend the holy fire when they need our help.

There's this concept in Hasidic Judaism tikkun olam that human beings participate in the drama of mending the world. We can't passively sit on the sidelines and expect others to fix the problems we see; we have to be active co-creators with God. Greg Mobley, my former Old Testament professor describes tikkun olam like this, "Before time, the blinding Infinite Light exploded into a billion sparks . . . But this creation of the many left the One diminished. It is the sacred duty of every person to let his or her little light shine, shine, shine, one good deed at a time, and thus restore the full brilliance of the Light of Lights." [5]

This is what Jesus is emphasizing with the story of Lazarus and the rich man, it's our sacred God-given duty to let our little lights shine one good deed at a time and thus help God mend the world. It's our sacred God-given duty to recognize God in one another. It's our sacred God-given duty to acknowledge the humanity of one another and help each other tend the sacred spark in each of us, especially the Lazaruses of our community. I pray that we leave her today with our little lights shining, and that we help others to shine too. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] "State Minimum Wages" National Conference of State Legislatures, August 29, 2013, <http://www.ncsl.org/issues-research/labor/state-minimum-wage-chart.aspx>

[2] Allen Banks, Youth Service Opportunities Project presentation.

[3] Luke 16:19-21, NRSV.

[4] Mark Allan Powell, *Fortress Introduction to the Gospels*, 93.

[5] Greg Mobley, *The Return of the Chaos Monster—and other Backstories of the Bible*, 82.