

Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God

1 St. John 4:7a

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Think for a moment about a story that comes to us in the Gospel According to St. Mark; in fact, it's a story that's only recorded by Mark.¹ Jesus comes to the city of Bethsaida; and some people bring to him a man who is blind, begging him to touch him; to heal him; to help him see. And Jesus takes the blind man by the hand, guiding the man who cannot see out of the village; away from the crowds. And, awkwardly for us, he spits on the man's eyes; and lays his hands on him; and afterwards asks the man if he can see. The man answers as honestly as he can. Yes, he can now see some men, but they seem as if they are trees, walking. Yup, things are better, but they could still be so much better. So Jesus tries again. Again, he puts his hands on the man's eyes; and, this time, when the man opens his eyes, his sight is fully restored. He can see all things clearly.

There is a temptation to assume that this week's Gospel is just a story about money; and how we ought to use money; not just for our own comfort and luxury but to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and heal the sick. And, if that's all that we want to take from this week's Gospel, then we will have done well. We know that feeding the hungry and clothing the naked and healing the sick were all incredibly important to Jesus; and they are exactly the kinds of things that Jesus made very clear were to be done by his disciples; by the Church. By us. No question. And there is another temptation to see what happens to that selfish, greedy, rich man in this week's Gospel as the just punishment for a life of uncontrolled comfort and ease; a life of selfishness getting its due reward: eternal agony and torment in the unquenchable fires of hell.

And, again, there is much in that which might serve as an important lesson to us all; surely, we see something of the same conclusion in Jesus' well-known parable of the sheep and the goats; where the goats, those who in their lives had refused to do acts of mercy and compassion for the poor and the hungry and the marginalised and the lonely are ordered out from the presence of the Son of Man sitting on his throne in glory; out into eternal punishment.

But what if there's more to this story? What if this story isn't just about riches and wealth, and how we use them; and generosity and compassion to the poor and the hungry and the marginalised, and how we are called by Christ to live mercifully.

And what if this story isn't really a detailed description of divine justice; what if it's not really a picture of heaven and hell; of punishment and reward; the bliss and joy of Abraham's bosom for those who have suffered in this life; and torment and punishment for the rich who have lived with self-absorbed comfort and ease; the good going to heaven; and the bad going to hell, as we sometimes like to think; with that great unbridgeable gulf lying forever between the two.

What about the possibility that this story is really about something far less complicated than those kinds of big theological questions? What if this story is about something else? What if this story is simply about how we see? And what we see.

¹ St. Mark 8:22-26

And what we choose not to see.

The poor man in this story would have been almost invisible. The rich man, comfortable and snug inside his lovely home, simply could not have been bothered with a beggar lounging around outside his gate. He has meals to plan and invitations to send out; and entertainment to arrange; and servants to order around. He has other things to keep him busy; too busy to slow down to see what he really has no wish to see. Sure, he might have to step over him from time to time. Sure, he knows that he's there; but he has no time to worry about something as insignificant as a beggar outside his gate.

I said last week on Trinity Sunday, as I have said many times before, that the Trinity is what we mean when we say that God is love: the love of the Father flowing eternally to the Son and the love of the Son flowing eternally to the Father: Father, Son, and Spirit in a relationship of never-ending love. Love isn't just a word that we use to say something about God. Love is who God is. God is Trinity. God is love. And I said last week, as I have said many times before, that this image of God's nature as Trinity is an image of our own nature, as those who have been made in the image of God. So we should not be surprised as we celebrate the first Sunday after Trinity that this week's Epistle, focusses so intensely on the question of love: *Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God.* Because the Season of Trinity, which we have now just started again, is all about how we grow into the image in which God has made us; the image which Christ, through the Holy Spirit, is in the business of remaking in us.

And we start out this week, as we start out on the First Sunday after Trinity every year; [we start out] hearing the story of poor Lazarus and the Rich Man. That story that calls us to open our eyes; to see all the different Lazaruses that may be lying at our gates, not necessarily the gates of our homes but the gates of our hearts. The ones that we don't hate; the ones that we would never intentionally hurt or harm; but the ones that we never see. Maybe because we really don't want to see them. Maybe because we're a little scared to see them.

So maybe we're a bit like that blind man brought to Jesus. Who Jesus had to touch more than once before he could see clearly. Maybe we hear this story every year because we need God to touch our eyes over and over again. Because it's so incredibly easy just to turn the other way. Because if we are to be what were made to be, then love has to be more than just a word on the page. It has to be more than just a nice idea. Something we can say when we send a card or click a button on Facebook. It has to be real. It has to be tangible. The kind of thing that can be felt and touched. Even if that makes us feel a little uncomfortable.

So, who are they for you and for me? The ones we never see. Or choose not to see. Who or what is the Lazarus that God has sent into my life? What people or situations or circumstances have been sent my way to get me out of my own head; to get me to pay attention to the needs of others? The ones who rub me the "wrong" way in order to get me to see that maybe I'm the one who is wrong; that I'm living with my head, or my heart, in hell? Everyday God is working out our salvation; putting all the pieces in place, offering me a better way. But am I paying attention? Do I see my brother Lazarus whom God has put on my path, whomever or whatever that might look like? Or am I too absorbed in myself to notice?