

Public Radio has a weekly show called *Speaking of Faith*. The name has recently changed to *Being*. Earlier this summer Krista Tippett interviewed a young man named Shane Claiborne who had started new community of young people called the New Monastics. They have an emphasis on caring for the poor. Shane tells of praying one day. It was on the tip of his tongue to ask; why God do you allow such poverty and suffering in the world? He suddenly realized he could not ask that question – he knew the answer God would give him. In an instant he knew that God would ask him, Shane, why have you allowed such poverty and suffering to exist in the world?

That is precisely what Jesus asks us, each one of us, in the parable that we just heard this morning. How have you and I allowed poverty and suffering to exist in the world? My first thought in response? Oh, come on, I cannot personally do anything to solve the suffering of the world. I'm not Bill Gates. I'm not Oprah Winfrey. I'm not Bono who has the star power and world stage of rock and roll to spread the message of the UN Millennium Goals.

That is precisely why Jesus uses this particular story. Abraham doesn't accuse the rich man of ignoring the whole world. He accuses him of ignoring the man, a named man, Lazarus right at his own gate.

Now let's look at some of the details of this story. First of all, it's a story found in the popular culture. It is not a traditional parable that Jesus uses on this occasion. His audience would have been familiar with the gist of this story. And just like we hear stories of the pearly gates without necessarily believing that there are pearly gates, we shouldn't think this is story to tell us about what happens when we die. It's not meant to define for us what heaven and hell are

like. That's just the vehicle that Jesus uses because it is familiar to his audience. It's meant to teach us about our relationships with and responsibilities to those around us.

We wonder if Jesus is telling us in this story that all rich people are bad and go to Hades (the Greek word for Sheol or the place of the dead) and all poor people are good and therefore go to be with Abraham. No, Jesus is not making a moral judgment about the rich or the poor.

Here's what Jesus is trying to teach us:

- The Pharisees think they know the scripture, but they have it wrong. They latched on to a particular part of the Hebrew Scripture which they interpret to mean that if they are wealthy it is because God has blessed them. The poor must be poor for a reason, they think. They must be unrighteous in God's eyes and so God has decreed their fate.
- The message of Jesus, and the true message of the law and the prophets is this: we are responsible for each other; for the poor, the sick, the orphan and widow. Abraham tells the rich man that he and his brothers could have listened to Moses and the prophets. We've been hearing from Jeremiah all month. We too could listen to God's message given through Jeremiah.
- But this is not easy. We get stuck in our patterns of behavior and we forget people who are in plain sight. The more we have, the easier it is to be distanced from the needy. It is our responsibility to bridge the chasm that has opened between us and open the gate where Lazarus sits.

Unfortunately, we become hardened to poverty when we are surrounded by it. When Philip and I were living in Honduras in the capital city of Tegucigalpa we were horrified to see that people barricaded themselves in their homes to separate themselves from the poor. The homes of the middle and upper classes in the city not only had walls and gates that were bolted tightly shut, but they had electrified wire or razor wire topping the walls, and they had

armed guards. But after living there for a time we realized why this sad situation existed. The poor there are so desperate that they rob, hijack, kidnap, and murder for a few lempiras.

Many people cautioned me not to walk home from church even in the middle of the day on well travelled streets. In the cities, there isn't a workable solution in place currently for those who are comfortably well off to help the poor. And so the pattern of behavior creates a very wide chasm that is fixed. The gates are closed and locked.

Those of you who live in NYC are a little closer to that reality than are we here in the country. It's not that poverty does not exist here, but in some ways it's easier to ignore. We live farther apart, and for the most part we don't have gates, and we don't find people sitting near our doors in need.

For this reason, we'll find this parable to be most helpful to us if we don't try to take it literally. You and I may not live like the rich man who eats sumptuously every day and who wears the royal purple. Lazarus may not be a beggar at our gate with running sores who waits for us to fling out our scraps.

Lazarus provides for each of us a different challenge. Who is the Lazarus at your gate? He or she may be a person near where we live who is in plain sight, but hides his struggles for one reason or another.

- Is it the single mother or father who goes to a food pantry but conceals their need out of embarrassment?
- Is it the migrant farm worker who, here illegally, is afraid to ask for help and be discovered?
- Or is it the family next door who seem to be working full time, and doing fine, but unbeknownst to us, only make the lowest wage and are constantly falling behind.

- What about the residents at our local homes, Noble, Geer and Sharon Health Care, who silently wait for someone to visit, but seldom does anyone come by.

These people are in plain sight, they are at our virtual gate and we often are ignorant of their existence.

And as our Gospel reading ended last week, so it begins this week. We cannot serve God and wealth. We cannot serve our stuff, and our possessions, and serve God too. It turns out that, generally speaking, the more things we have the more we have a tendency to serve our wealth. A couple of years ago our local paper, the Lakeville Journal, presented an interesting article on the generosity of the people in the Northwest Corner of CT. They showed that on average Salisbury has the highest income per capita. Canaan has the lowest. Then they looked at charitable giving. Salisbury with the highest income had the lowest percentage of giving per capita. That pattern is reflected in our country as a whole. Those who have the most, give the least as a percentage of their wealth. Between us a great chasm has been fixed, and it has to do with our stuff and how it separates us from other people.

In God's economy what matters is our connections with one another. We all have responsibilities for each other because we all have God's blessings and gifts in different and various ways.

God is not willing to settle for the chasms that we have set up whether they are of barbed wire or just a lawn and a hedge, or an apartment wall.

We here who represent two generous Trinity Churches are doing a great deal through our outreach to bridge that chasm. Today many of us will walk, or give in support of walkers, to show solidarity with the poor in the annual CROP walk. We know of many, many good works done by Trinity Wall Street through their grants and Faith in Action programs. We are not in the sad position that some poor cities find themselves with armed camps of poor and rich.

And yet, there is always more to be done. The Kingdom of heaven knows no boundaries or chasms. Whatever our individual gifts we have the obligation and the opportunity to employ them to better someone's lot. We can help God to bring the Kingdom here. We can cook a meal, offer to babysit, drive someone to the store, or go and visit a lonely person. Where can you yourself reach out to someone who needs help? How will **you** use your gifts to stop the poverty and suffering? We cannot let Lazarus languish by our gate.