

Selective Vision

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September 27, 2026
Maplewood P.C.**

**Luke 16:19-31
Deut. 15:4-11**

Introduction to Luke 16:19-31

A characteristic that runs throughout Luke's Gospel, is a teaching of Jesus encapsulated in his statement: "those to whom much is given, much will be required." Just before today's parable, this teaching takes the form: "You cannot serve both God and money." These two statements form a lead-in to our passage today about the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, a parable about what we see and what we don't see when looking at wealth and poverty here and now. (Read Luke 16:19-31 from "The Message")

Sermon

When our boys were young, my wife, Ann, and I sometimes had some concern about their hearing. We'd speak and get no response, so we'd increase our volume a little and would get the same non-response. Ann became concerned enough that she took them both to the doctor to be tested. After testing, the doctor gave us the bad news. Their hearing was fine. It's just that they listened when wanted to listen and pretended not to hear when they didn't like what they were hearing. The doctor diagnosed them with what a lot of kids come down with at their age when being around their parents: selective hearing syndrome.

I used to think this syndrome was present only with hearing. I discovered it's also true with seeing. Our eyes are our windows on the world and like any window, they show us most everything. But given all the visual stimuli that we receive, our brain filters out certain things and focuses on just those few things we want to see.

I read recently a fascinating story about a woman having an unusual visual disorder caused by brain damage that left her unable to see. The odd part of this visual disorder is not that she sees nothing. It's that she sees everything, and so her brain no longer allows her to sort through the multiple images that strike her eyes and focus just on a few things at one time. When everything rushes in upon her, it overwhelms her so much her vision simply shuts down.

We can all experience that in some way, can't we? We can get so overwhelmed with everything in the news coming at us that we just can't see anything anymore. What we have to look at in our world and country today is a good example of this, isn't it? We can see so much, that our filters block out those things we don't want to see. Selective hearing has its partner in selective seeing.

Vision problems seem to impact most everyone in some way – either seeing so much we just become blind to it by shutting it down or choosing to see some things while ignoring others.

Today's parable from Jesus is an example of the latter. A rich man lives the good life with everything he needs and more while a poor man, Lazarus, lies at his gate waiting for a tiny smidgen of the rich man's bread. The rich man eats in luxury with his friends while Lazarus sits in misery and in rags, eating with the dogs. The rich man seemingly spends his life never seeing Lazarus, though Lazarus is just feet away. It's not until the rich man's life ends, Jesus says that the rich man "lifts up his eyes" to notice the poor man. A bit late. His life is over. During his life, the rich man was inflicted with selective vision syndrome.

There's a witty and wonderful Mel Brooks movie I like a lot called "Life Stinks." Did any of you see it? Brooks plays a wealthy businessman, Goddard Bolt, who has the best of everything - and wants more. He plans to tear down some old downtown buildings and erect in their place a modern luxury apartment complex and shopping mall.

Then one of his employees asks: "But, Mr. Bolt, what about the people living down there in the buildings?" "What people?" he answers. "There are only deserted buildings." Like the rich man in Jesus' parable, Goddard Bolt is oblivious to the poor. He looks out on his world and only sees run-down buildings (that need tearing down to make room for luxury high rises where he can make more millions). He has ignored the fact that there are people who are living in those buildings who will be displaced if the buildings are torn down to make room for expensive condos.

As a result of a wager with another wealthy man who also wants to buy the buildings for the same purpose, Bolt accepts a challenge to live among the people in these buildings for 30 days and, if he wins the bet, he earns the right to buy the buildings uncontested from this other man. So he moves into the rundown neighborhood - not unlike "the Word becoming flesh and moving into the neighborhood" - and Goddard lives on the streets among the homeless. He makes friends with a number of them and learns that they are not bad or lazy people, but often just down on their luck people who have had bad breaks in life or sometimes made mistakes they can't easily reverse.

The experience living among the people for a month changes him. He learns not only to look, but to see; not only to see but to feel; not only to feel but to act. Spoiler alert. He wins the bet and rather than remove the buildings and replace them with luxury condos and a shopping mall, he chooses to renovate them and build new shelters for all the homeless.

The rich man in the parable doesn't learn to see until it's too late and the chasm is too great to bridge. He learns after this life that he's viewed things all wrong, concerned only with his comfort and missing the last and the least just

feet away from him. Realizing now that God's world is not meant to be structured the way our systems have structured the world, he pleads with Father Abraham to send someone back from the dead to warn his brothers of their peril, so they can see what he now sees on the other side.

I can certainly sympathize with the rich man. It's difficult to see when there's so much coming at us and we have to sort through what we'll pay attention to and what we won't.

I can remember reading about the evangelical social activist, Jim Wallis, who went through the bible once and cut out all the passages that had to do with poverty, wealth, injustice and the lack of seeing the poor. When he spoke to groups, he'd take with him a Bible that had sections shredded from it. Remove these passages from the Bible, he said, and you don't have much of a bible left, just the selected vision version.

The rich man in this story lived in a fantasy world. He seemed to think the world was structured in such a way that the rich deserved what they have living in luxury because they'd earned it. And the poor, living outside the gate in misery, deserved their lot in life. (I don't think this is unlike what many current Israeli and US politicians think of Gaza – they deserve their lot, even if that means 20,000-30,000 children be massacred).

There is an important thing to note about this biblical story, lest we look down on wealth. There is nothing in that parable that says the rich man went to hell only because he was rich. Says Martin Luther King, "Jesus never ever made a universal indictment against all wealth." No, according to this parable, the rich man ended up tormented not because he was rich, but because his richness paralyzed him to poverty and he passed by Lazarus every day, never really seeing him. The poor man reached out to rich man every day, but the rich man never reached back. The chasm between the rich man and impoverished one was, sadly, never crossed because the rich man failed to look and see.

So the rich man chose his destiny because he allowed Lazarus to become invisible...failing to use his wealth and power wealth to bridge the gulf that separated him from Lazarus. In fact, the rich man doesn't even recognize that Lazarus was a brother"¹ (much like Israel -with US support - fail to recognize Palestinians as their brothers, from the same roots).

We might say that this is not primarily a parable about poverty or about wealth. It's a story about vision, a story in which Jesus calls us to confront the reality that every day there are people who are, in fact, kin in need that we may not see and *walk right by – the Lazarus at our gate that gets bypassed*. Regrettably, that's how the poor are sometimes treated – as if we're better off with them out of sight or gone for good.

¹ From "The Church at the Forefront of Racial Progress," by Martin Luther King, Jr., preached at the Anderson Auditorium, Montreat, N.C.

Today, our country no longer has a department dedicated to foreign aid for that very reason. In a stunning and move months ago, the world's richest man and the man who holds the most powerful office in the world, joined forces to wipe out \$42 billion from US AID to the Lazarus' of this world – threw all that AID “into the wood chipper,” saying all that money was simply... “a waste.”

A recent study published in Britian's esteemed medical journal, The Lancet, estimated that about one and a half million people will die each year without those funds, 700,000 under the age of 5, or 88 children every hour because of cuts made to AID, the widely popular humanitarian assistance that made us safer and the world more stable.

Pulitzer prize winning journalist Nicolas Kristof writes from his firsthand experience of the impact of the loss of US AID:

Not only are aid cuts killing hundreds of people every day, Kristof laments, but the death toll is accelerating. Stockpiles of food and medicine are running out. Village health workers who used to provide inexpensive preventive care have been laid off. Public health initiatives have collapsed. Immunizations are being missed. Contraception is harder to get. Ordinary people are growing weaker, hungrier and more fragile. So as months pass, the crisis is growing increasingly lethal — and because children are particularly vulnerable, they are often the first to starve and the first to die.

Kristof gives the example of Valentine Tusifu, a 36-year-old refugee from the Congo, who is mourning the loss of her 10-year-old daughter, Jibia. The girl excelled in school, and dreamed of becoming a nurse. But the family had to pull Jibia out of school last year when the loss of American funding led to a mass firing and loss of teachers. Jibia cried inconsolably as she had to drop out of her classes as a child.

Then it got worse. The family's mosquito nets developed holes, but with aid cuts, the health center had run out of new nets, so Jibia slept unprotected. Without funds to buy anti-malaria medication, she contracted malaria. Jibia's mom took the girl, feverish and vomiting, to the local health center, but it, too, had run out of necessary medicines. Doctors say they tried to rush the girl to a regional hospital. But ambulances were unavailable because drivers had been laid off as a result of cuts in U.S. assistance and there was no blood transfusion program, because it relied on US AID. So Jibia, died on July 7, as hundreds of thousands of children have this past year and a half due to the lack of US AID.

Cutting aid to the poor to give tax breaks to the world's wealthiest people – the billionaires – does raise a pretty basic question, doesn't it? Where's the humanity? Where's the decency? Where's the care and compassion? It boggles my mind and breaks my heart to see the world's poorest crushed by the world's wealthiest and most powerful in an act that runs diametrically opposed to Jesus'

vision for this world. Turning a blind eye to the poor and cutting aid costs everyone immeasurably more in the long run. Everyone.

When Jesus told the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, it was to help us see and respond to the poor. Just as when Jesus told the parable of the good Samaritan it was about seeing the one suffering alongside the road and having compassion. It was about loving our neighbor, not ignoring them. It was about reaching out to care for the last and the least, the left out and let down, the lost and the lonely - not to take away their life support and let them die. Suffering, said CS Lewis, is God's megaphone to the world. Are we listening? Are we seeing? Are we feeling the impact?

Martin Luther King was spot on when he argued that the greatest challenge facing the church is to be as concerned as Christ was about seeing and caring for the last and the least of these (the Lazarus' all around) – because, as he would put it, “in the final analysis we are all...rich and poor...tied in a single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality.” “And...we must all learn to live together as brothers [and sisters] (truly seeing the other) or we will all perish as fools.”

Jesus doesn't tell this story against those who are rich, but to those who, in their wealth and comfort, fail to notice the Lazarus' all around them. ((He tells it, I think, to irritate us, agitate us and activate us to see, to understand, to feel, to do something to bridge the gap between the very wealthy and the very poor.))

We are our brother's keeper, after all. And “those to whom much is given,” Jesus would say, “much is required.” Says the great preacher James Forbes, “entrance to heaven requires only one thing – a reference letter from the poor.” It's feeling what life is like for those on the outskirts, the Lazarus' among us.

Can we imagine a world and a politics that embraces the Lazarus' of our world? Can we imagine that God has made us in such a way that our salvation is dependent on the salvation of all others when we are all equals. In the parable, Lazarus sees the rich man every day, but the rich man never sees Lazarus, never reaches out a hand, never crosses the gulf, never bridges the chasm. But when that's done, and I know you do, our vision is transformed and we see the person beside us and all those at our gate as beloved children of God... all “tied in a single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality.”

May God, in God's great love and mercy, give us a vision like that!

Let us pray. Christ of vision, clear our eyes that we might see you in the poor. Clear our ears that we might hear you in the suffering. Clear our hearts that we might make room for you in the last and the least, the left out, the let down, the lost, the lonely. Challenge us - giving us a vision where all – especially the Lazarus' - are seen as your beloved children and included in your and our loving embrace, just as Jesus has done with us all. Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

September 27, 2026

Gracious God,

You who pay such close attention to us out of love for us, we worship you. Give us the compassion and courage to pay such close attention to others that no one falls outside the scope of our concern and care.

Through this parable of the rich man and Lazarus, let it irritate us, agitate us and motivate us to recognize blinders we may have on and then, when scales on our eyes fall, to live more generously and graciously. Help us pay close attention to those nearest us – our spouses, children, grandchildren, friends and neighbors. And give us eyes to also see and respond to those who may live far away from us but fall within your heart's reach.

Guide us now in the way of Jesus, the path that leads us to true justice for those Lazarus' on the margins. Lead us to stand alongside those without a voice, so our collective voice rises to seek justice for all. Walk with us as we strive to remain faithful in this journey."

Continually open our eyes to the needs of others. Soften our hearts to respond with empathy and kindness. Give us a willing spirit to share resources and act with generosity, knowing that to those whom much is given, much is required.

We remember today...

Now send us from here to do all the good we can, by all the means we can, in all the places we can, at all the times we can, to all the people we can, for as long as we can.

We gather these prayer for others together and offer them from our hearts to yours as we pray together the prayer that Jesus taught: "Our Father, who art in heaven..."