

“[Children] as young as six and seven . . . have to root through the waste in order to eat.

Truck after truck rumbles onto the hilltop.

Dozens of adults and children fight for position.

Each truck dumps its load.

Feverishly, the scavengers reach up into the sliding ooze to pluck out bits of plastic, wood, and tin.

The trash squishes beneath their feet, moistened by loads from hospitals, full of blood and placentas.

Occasionally a child, with hands blackened by garbage, picks up a piece of stale bread and eats it.

As the youngsters sort through the stinking stew, black buzzards soar in a dark, swirling cloud and defecate on the people below.”

That’s an excerpt from the book, *Enrique’s Journey*, written by journalist Sonia Nazario.

She writes about the abject poverty in countries in Central and South America.

If that vignette was jarring to you, that’s good.

It was supposed to be.

I use this extreme example, because in the story we heard this morning, Jesus uses extreme examples to get his point across.

He doesn't tell his followers about a working class family living paycheck to paycheck and a rich person who has a little extra cash to spare.

This is destitute poverty and illness, this is the person who pulls a half-eaten sandwich out of a garbage can and promptly eats it.

Your jaw instinctively tightens, doesn't it?

How bad off would you have to be to flick off pieces of coffee grounds and dirt from a stranger's castoff cheeseburger before eating it?

That's Lazarus, except that he is also covered in sores.

And Lazarus is contrasted with the most extravagant wealth, not just the 1%, more like the .05% person.

This man is richer than rich, he is like Saudi Arabian rich.

He wears purple linen clothing, that's like someone wearing a tailored silk Armani suit today.

He lived in the lap of luxury.

Even the Greek word for "gate" in verse 20 was extravagant.

This is not a small gate on someone's white picket fence.

This word was used to describe soaring portals—the kind of huge and heavy wrought-iron gates you see if you drive around Beverly Hills.

Jesus wastes no time painting with a broad brush.

We've got the picture.

This isn't merely someone who is comfortably well-off.

This man is super-rich and Lazarus is really poor.

Now, it's easy enough to say that the moral of the story is that it's a sin to be exorbitantly wealthy, as there are plenty of other scriptures that convey the same message.

But I think another moral of this story, that might be of equal importance, is that it's a sin to ignore those in need.

Lazarus, (who, just to be clear, is not the same Lazarus who is Jesus' friend who gets raised from the dead), is literally lying at the rich man's front gate, right outside his house, and he doesn't see him.

It is a sin that he ignores Lazarus, he comes and goes from his home, and does nothing, nothing(!) for this man who is literally dying on his doorstep.

And, what's interesting is that Jesus NAMES this poor man.

In the Bible, you know someone is important if they have a name.

If they don't have a name, they are of lesser importance, that's just a biblical rule.

The story that we heard this morning is the only one in all of Jesus' parables in which a character is given a name.

Think about it... the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, the Woman with the Lost Coin, the Sower, I could go on, but the point is that none of them have names except Lazarus.

It's also interesting because he might be the person in all the stories who is the worst off.

It doesn't get much worse than a starving man, covered in sores who then dies.

And yet he is the most important.

I think Jesus is telling us something here.

This man mattered, maybe the rich man and the rest of the world ignored him, but he still had intrinsic worth and he was loved by God.

Perhaps the people we don't see, the ones who are invisible to us, are the ones who we should be paying the most attention to.

Sometimes the poorest and most vulnerable people are obvious, like the person on the street corner with the cardboard sign, but they're not always that obvious.

Sometimes it's the single mom in the one-bedroom apartment with 3 kids who can't pay the utility bills,

or it's the isolated and elderly person in the home you drive by everyday who has been forgotten by the world and is just waiting to pass on.

These people live all around us, and they can be hard to see.

Yet this is our job to open our eyes up to them.

Maybe you see yourself as Lazarus or the rich man in this story, but I can relate to the rich man's five brothers.

While Lazarus is in heaven and the rich man is in hell, we find out that the rich man has five brothers who are still alive, and he asks Abraham to please tell them to be loving and compassionate, so that they don't end up in hell like he did.

Abraham has a fascinating reply.

He says, "*They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.*"

³⁰*[The rich man replies], "No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent."*

³¹*He said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."* (Luke 16: 29-31).

This is a fascinating dialogue about faith and devotion.

The rich man thinks that if his brothers are shocked with the sight of someone rising from the dead, then they'll repent out of fear.

But Abraham wisely says that they have the Holy texts, they have Moses and the prophets, they know what to do.

If they don't listen to them, a person rising from the dead won't convince them.

Either you have faith or you don't, no amount of shock and awe can change someone's heart.

I can relate to the brothers because, for one thing, we are still here.

And we have the scriptures, we have Moses and the story of liberation, but we also have Jesus.

We have the stories of how he treated people like Lazarus (both of them), and the widow, and the leper and the prostitute, and the Samaritan, and anyone on the other side of the railroad tracks, or living under a bridge, or anyone struggling with addiction or mental illness or any single parent struggling to get by or recent immigrant facing language barriers and discrimination or elderly person who feels alone and neglected.

We know how Jesus would have treated these people, the question is, do we have the faith to do the same thing?

Now is our chance.

If the fear of going to hell motivates you, then by all means, go with it, if it compels you to help others.

But I am afraid, not of hell, but of missing every opportunity we are given, while we are on earth, to serve others.

Life is short and precious and what a shame it would be if we squandered the potential we have to help improve the lives of other people.

I recently took a quiz online in which you enter in your annual income and assets, and it tells you how rich you are compared to the rest of the world.

I am embarrassed to say that I am in the top 10% of richest people around the world, and I would venture to guess that almost all of us are in the top 15%.

Just by virtue of living in the United States, we are richer than the majority of the world.

This means we have a responsibility to help others, to take our scriptures seriously and to follow them, as Abraham said.

And in order to help others, we have to be able to see them.

And in order to see them, we have to tear down all the walls of safety and security and denial that keep our blinders up.

One thing I noticed about living in New York City was that it was impossible to ignore poverty.

There was section 8 housing next to million dollar condominiums.

As sequestered as wealthy people in Manhattan can make themselves, they still had to intersect with people who lived in poverty.

Living in Burlington, for those of us who don't commute into the city, I have noticed that it is much easier for us go day in and day out without confronting the harsh realities of poverty that exist all around us.

So we need to make an intentional effort to look for and reach out to those who need our love and support.

And maybe more importantly, to not judge those who need it.

Jesus doesn't explain to us WHY Lazarus was poor and covered in sores.

Whenever Jesus tells us of someone in need, he doesn't explain and justify their need for help, which I think is what many of us do.

We ask the question, how did they get in that circumstance?

Did they use their resources wisely?

Don't they have family that can help them?

Why aren't they working? And so on and so forth.

Sometimes we are quick to cast judgment and slow to help, and this is another way of reserving compassion, of keeping our walls up.

Or, as one theologian says, *"Could it be that not having compassion is one sure sign of being lost?"*

Even more, might Jesus be warning that riches can stunt our compassion by insulating us from the need of others?"...

If we cannot feel compassion for others we have lost something that is deeply and genuinely human.

In time, the wealth that has numbed us to the need of our neighbor deludes us into imagining that we ourselves have no need,

are sufficient unto ourselves, and can easily substitute hard work and a little luck for grace and mercy.

At that point, we are, indeed, lost.” (Lose, David. “In God We Trust: God & Money, Pt. 2”, WorkingPreacher.org.)

In his inability to see Lazarus, what the rich man missed was that he needed Lazarus as much as Lazarus needed him.

We all need each other, lest we forget that we belong to each other and any of us could easily be the one in need.

So, let us take the scriptures seriously, for we have Moses and Jesus and all the prophets to remind us that we are called to seize every opportunity we have,

while on this earth,

not to judge each other,

but to truly see each other, eye to eye, and thereby help each other.

Amen.