

Sermon for Sunday, September 25, 2016
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

“Jesus said, ‘There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day.’”

So begins
our reading today
from the gospel according to St Luke,
another one
of Jesus’
great parables.

And he tells it
in the same setting
as the last few weeks’
stories, the way Luke tells it.
Jesus has been traveling a while
when he comes to a town
and the local religious leaders
invite him
for dinner.
And he accepts their invitation
and, as usual, while they are eating dinner,
begins to talk.
And tells the parable of the wedding banquet,
and the parable of the dinner party,
and then
after dinner
goes back out to the crowds
and talks with them
about the cost
of following him.

And the tax collectors
and other undesirables
push closer to hear him,
and he tells the parables of the lost sheep
and the lost coin

and the lost boys,
and the religious leaders
began to get a little uncomfortable,
and then, ignoring them
he turns to his disciples
and tells the parable
of the unjust steward.
And the religious leaders
become even more uncomfortable,
and next thing,
as usual,
he begins to tell
a story,
a story
of a rich man
and a poor man.

The rich man
in his palatial home
surrounded by luxury,
and the poor man
huddled in the shade
provided by the gatehouse
surrounded by stray dogs
who were the only ones
to offer him any
comfort.
Then then, one day,
both of them die.
And the rich man
is carried away in a funeral procession
and buried with great pomp and ceremony
and ends up
in the place of the dead.
And the poor man's remains
are carted away
to a common grave,
but he ends up
with the great prophet Abraham.

Now remember,
this is a parable.
It's an invented story,
almost a fairy tale,
that Jesus told
to make a point.
He was surrounded by
the most despised members of the community,
the tax collectors,
who were desperate to hear him,
while in the background
some of the religious leaders
were ridiculing him
for spending time with people
that no one
would ever want
to call their friends.

Most often
when we read this story
this is where we get stuck.
The poor man
with Abraham, presumably in heaven,
and the rich one
in a tortured hell.

But remember,
this is a parable.
Jesus was telling a story to make a point,
and this is no more a description of the reality of heaven and hell
than gingerbread houses can be found in the woods, with witches waiting to trap
unwary children.

Jesus' focus here
is not where the rich man and Lazarus end up
but what happens
when they get there.

The rich man
looks up

and sees the poor man,
and recognizes him
as the beggar who used to lie in the shade of his gate.
And he calls out to Abraham,
“Please tell Lazarus - he’s finally remembered his name - please tell him to come and
bring me some water!”
Now remember,
Lazarus
had been outside the rich man’s gate for years,
and not once
had the rich man even thought to send him cool water
to drink
let alone
to wash his sores -
the closest thing to water
Lazarus had
was the drool of the dogs
that kept him company.
“Please send Lazarus
to bring me water.”

“Nope,” says Abraham.
“Can’t do it. There’s no way for him to get
from here
to there.”

And the rich man
had nothing to say.
But then he tries again.
“Well, maybe you could send him
to tell my brothers
how horrible it is here,
and then at least they
wouldn’t have to be like me.”

“Nope,” says Abraham.
“Can’t do it.
You had your chance,
and so do they.
All you needed to know

was in the scriptures.
They have
the same resources.”

“But they’d pay attention
if someone came back from the dead!”
says the rich man.

“Ya think?” says Abraham.

End of story.

And Jesus offers no explanation.
Because, I suspect,
this is one of those parables
that has multiple layers of meaning.
And he wants the people listening to him,
the disciples
and the crowds
and the tax collectors
and the religious leaders
he wants all of them
to listen,
to listen
and think
and then work out
what they need
to do.

It’s not a parable
of simple morals
or easy answers.
And it demands that we ask
hard questions,
questions of the parable,
and questions
of ourselves.

Who were these people, Lazarus and the rich man?
How did Lazarus

come to be
in such a terrible state?
Was he disabled?
Old?
Or just a failure?
And how is it
that he got to be rewarded
after death?
Did he pray a lot?
Was he especially holy?
Did he know
his scriptures?

The parable
doesn't tell us.

And what about the rich man?
How did he get to be rich?
Was it hard work
or inherited money?
And how was it
that he seems to have ignored
the man by his gate
but suddenly remembers him
now
that he needs something?
Why was the rich man
so oblivious to the poor man
that he didn't even
give him some food?
And was Jesus talking of himself
when he said
that they won't pay attention
even if someone
were to come back
from the dead?

There are so many questions
that this parable raises.
But the one that has been niggling at me all week is

why didn't the rich man
seem to even see the poor man?
And who are the people
who we don't see, people we don't see
and don't pay attention to?

You see,

Lazarus was there by the gate
all that time.

And all that time
not only was he ignored
by the one
who could have fed him,
he was ignored by one
who could have learned from him.

Because presumably there was something about Lazarus
that meant he ended up with Abraham.

If only the rich man
had seen him
and heard him
and learned from him.

What if there is someone
that I simply don't see?

And that concern is compounded
by the rhetoric of our election.

Both sides are to blame.

When you refer to human beings
as skittles
or deplorables,
you are hardly seeing them
as created in God's image.

So who are the people
who we just don't see,
the people we don't hear,
the people
who we could learn from
and as a result
experience God's grace?

Here in St James
suspect we think of ourselves
as somewhat removed
from the tensions
that are tearing our country apart,
pitting black against white against hispanic,
immigrants against native born.
We 're pretty homogenous
and pretty
safe.

And yet
I'm always struck
on the rare occasions I catch an early Monday morning train
by the people getting off the train from the city.
There are a bunch of them,
mostly older black women,
but some hispanic,
typically carrying overnight bags
or small suitcases.
They come out to our area
to be nannies
or cleaners
or to care for our older and disabled neighbors.
And they are invisible.

As are many others in our community
who care for us.
You only have to go into the laundry
to see them,
living in apartments above shops on Lake Avenue
or in basement or garage apartments.
Occasionally you meet them
at the food pantry.

They are our neighbors
and we don't even notice them.

And even here at church
there are people we don't see.

Every so often
I'm a little surprised
when I'm having a conversation with a parishioner
and mention someone else who is a member here,
and they int know them.
Or when they ask about "the new person"
and I have to gently say
that the "new person"
has been coming regularly
for the last six months.

I'm not saying this
to shame or blame anyone,
but rather
to encourage us all
to look around
and see who we might be missing.
Whether it's here at church
or out in the street.
They may show us something
of God's grace.