

## SEEING WITH YOUR HEART



***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

One afternoon in June 2005, a group of people gathered on the front porch of a small house at 514 S. Norwood Street here in Wallace. Mayor Charley Farris cut the ribbon and Duplin Christian Outreach Ministries was open for business after many months of planning, dreaming, praying, and hard work of many people.

You can learn more about DCOM on the crisis center's website at [www.duplinchristian.com](http://www.duplinchristian.com). When you click on "About Us," you will find out that Duplin Christian Outreach Ministries was founded in 2005 as an interdenominational ministry to assist our Duplin neighbors in crisis. The website also identifies three main goals of the crisis ministry:

- \* Better Future: DCOM helps clients to get beyond their crisis. Join us.
- \* Better Hope: Hope is the bridge that allows us to see beyond our present circumstances. Help us build the bridge over current obstacles so our clients can better themselves.
- \* Respond in Love: We love God when we help the least of our brethren. Join us to offer a hand up.

When the steering committee began dreaming of a centralized community crisis center, the members committed to two guiding principles: (1) The name of the min-

istry would include the word Christian, even if that might make us ineligible for certain monetary grants. The ministry was started by Christians in response to Christ's call to help "the least of these who are members of my family" and (2) Every person who walked through the door of the crisis center on S. Norwood Street (and now Blessings in Store on Main Street and Kitchen of Blessings at the Campbell Center) would be treated with compassion and respect, as a child of God and a person of worth.

Mark Twain said, "It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand." Jesus' parable about Lazarus and the rich man is a hard story to hear, precisely because it's not hard to understand. However, it is very easy to *mis*-understand.

I could easily have stood in the pulpit this morning, read Luke 16:19-31, and preached a short sermon: "If you're rich, you're going to hell. If you're poor, you're going to heaven. Amen." But that's not what the parable teaches us. From time to time, people misquote the Bible to me when they say, "The Bible says, 'Money is the root of all evil.'" Well, they're wrong! Actually, the Bible says (1 Timothy 6:10), "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains."

On the other hand, I could have preached a sermon extolling the simple and joyful faith that many poor people have, but only at the risk of romanticizing poverty and perhaps providing us with a good reason to look the other way. Back in the mid 1990's, I made a trip to the southeastern Mexican state of Tabasco with a group of Presbyterians from the White Memorial Presbyterian Church in Raleigh. Two members from our congregation in Roanoke Rapids were part of the group. A good friend, Ricky, was a family physician who had done some medical mission work in Africa.

One day we rode in some dugout canoes to an island in the middle of a big lake just outside Villahermosa, the capital city of Tabasco. The three hundred island residents lived mainly off of the income from fishing the lake and selling their catch in the city market. That day, the men gave up a day's profits from fishing in order to feed us lunch and visit with us. When we pulled up onto the muddy banks in our canoes and climbed out, Ricky pulled me aside and said, "Now this looks like some of the places I worked in in Africa."

After a delightful afternoon of good food and fellowship and worship, we returned to the seminary in the city where we were staying. At our evening devotions that night, we all shared our impressions of the island visit. Almost to a person we each expressed the same thought: "The island people were poor in things, but their faith was so rich and full and vital." When it was Ricky's turn to speak, he said, "I agree their faith was inspiring, but don't think for a minute the parents on that island wouldn't like to have better living conditions, better sanitation, and better opportunities for their children." Then Ricky proceeded to tell us how he saw similar conditions twice a week less than twenty miles from our doorsteps in Roanoke Rapids. Ricky regularly visited rural Halifax County to provide primary health care to the Haliwa-Saponi Native Amer-

icans who had needs just as great as the island people near Villahermosa, Tabasco. The remoteness of both groups made it easy not to see them and their needs.

When we read Jesus' parables, it's tempting to pick them apart and try to assign meaning to each and every detail. But that's not how parables usually work. For instance, this parable about Lazarus and the rich man does not lay out a full theology of the afterlife or, as people have said, it doesn't describe the furniture of heaven nor the temperature of hell. The parable doesn't say a word about how the rich man got that way. We don't know if he was just very successful or very dishonest. We just know he was rich (actually, **very** rich because he wore expensive purple clothes and fine linen underwear and ate sumptuous meals every day of the week). We also don't know what kind of person Lazarus was, except that he lay at the rich man's gates each day, hungry and covered with sores.

What we do know is, the story is chock-full of contrasts that drive home the point of Jesus' parable:

The rich man was dressed in purple and linen. Lazarus was covered with sores.

The rich man celebrated each day. Lazarus longed to feed off the crumbs from the rich man's table.

The rich man apparently ignored Lazarus. The dogs came and kept Lazarus company.

The rich man died and was buried. Lazarus wasn't buried.

The rich man went to Hades. Lazarus died and was taken by angels to lie in the bosom of Abraham.

The rich man was in great pain in flames. He wanted Lazarus to bring him a bit of water.

The rich man received good things in life. Lazarus received bad things in life.

The rich man was in great pain. Lazarus was comforted.

The rich man could not cross over to Abraham and Lazarus. Lazarus could not cross over to the rich man.

The rich man enjoyed lavish meals in life, but had an unquenchable thirst in death. Lazarus lay hungry at the gates of the rich man in life, but was comforted in the bosom of Abraham in death.

The problem with the rich man in this story is not that he is rich, per se, but that he sees Lazarus with his eyes, but never with his heart. Let's assume the rich man had to pass by Lazarus every day as he went in and out of his gates. Couldn't he have spared some of the crumbs from his daily sumptuous feasts? Couldn't he have arranged for Lazarus to receive medical treatment for his sores? Couldn't he have taken the time to relate to him as a child of God and a person of worth?

Even in death, the rich man continued to act as if he were in a position to order people around. He never addresses Lazarus directly, but only talks about him in the third person — "Abraham, send Lazarus down here with some cool water. Abraham, send Lazarus to warn my five brothers." But Abraham tells him, "It's too late. And even if I did send Lazarus raised from the dead to warn your brothers, why would they

believe him? They already know what's required of them. They have the law and the prophets which teach that you are to love God with everything you have and your neighbors as you love yourselves."

A number of years ago, my mother called me on a Sunday afternoon and said, "I just have to tell you about the children's sermon in worship this morning." At the time, she worshiped at a very large Presbyterian church in Atlanta that had lots of children come forward for the children's sermon. The associate pastor invited the children to meet him on the steps, and a bunch of kids came and stood all around him, including behind him where he couldn't see. Whatever his topic was that morning, the minister talked to the children about the haves and the have nots in the world. Then he told them he was going to divide the group in half, with the children on the right as the haves and the children on the left as the have nots. My mom said the congregation started chuckling and then laughing at that point. At first the minister didn't know why, until he realized that a little boy standing behind him on the have nots side had very quietly moved over to the haves side. My mom said the minister quipped, "That boy is going to go far in this world!"

That's a funny story, but the increasing gap between the haves and the have nots in our world is not funny at all. Someone has commented that the uncrossable chasm between the rich man and Lazarus in the afterlife was actually begun by the rich man himself in this life, when he refused to see poor Lazarus lying at his gates.

It's always tempting to identify with one of the characters in Jesus' parables — and that's not a bad thing to do. In fact, Jesus tells his parables and, in a way, invites his hearers to do just that, so they can decide for themselves how his teaching applies to their lives.

Which character do you identify with in this parable?

The rich man? I guess it all depends on your perspective on what it means to be "rich." Compared to the rich man who wore expensive purple clothes and linen underwear and feasted every day, it would be easy to say, "That's not me." However, compared to the overwhelming majority of people who live in this world, we are the rich man.

What about Lazarus? Very few of us can identify personally with the hungry, poor man covered with sores lying by the gates of the rich man.

But what about the rich man's five brothers? The story ends with Abraham telling the rich man, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." Luke wrote his gospel some fifty years after Jesus died and was raised from the dead. Someone **had** risen from the dead and told them what God required of them. In fact, even before he had risen from the dead, Jesus told them and showed them what God expected when it comes to seeing people, not just with our eyes but with our hearts.

When he was only thirty years old, Albert Schweitzer had already obtained doctorates in theology, music, and philosophy. He was a renowned theologian and New Testament scholar. He was also a celebrated organist. Then he shocked his family and

acquaintances by announcing he would attend the University of Strasbourg to study medicine and become a medical doctor. His intention was to go to Africa and be a medical missionary. That's exactly what Albert Schweitzer did. He established the Albert Schweitzer Hospital in west central Africa. In 1952 he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. He served as a medical missionary in Africa for fifty years.

When Albert Schweitzer was asked why he had made the decision to leave such a successful career as a scholar, professor, and musician to become a medical missionary in Africa, he said it was because of this parable about the rich man and Lazarus. Schweitzer said the rich man represented Europe to him, with all of its medical care, and Africa Lazarus, in need of that care. According to Schweitzer, "it was inconceivable that he not do something because it was obvious that God was serious about that."<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps you've heard the story about the man who was walking on the beach and saw a little boy approaching him. Every so often, the little boy would bend down and throw something in the ocean. As the man got closer, he realized the tide had washed up and stranded thousands of starfish on the beach. The little boy was throwing the starfish in the water one at a time.

"What are you doing?" asked the man. The little boy said, "When the sun comes out, these starfish will die, so I'm throwing them back into the ocean." The man looked at all of the starfish on the sand and said, "There must be thousands of starfish here. You can't possibly make a difference." The boy bent down, picked up a starfish, threw it in the water, and looked at the man. "I made a huge difference to that one!"

The parable about Lazarus and the rich man is a wake up call and warning. It's a warning against getting so caught up in our own worlds that we fail to see the needs of people around us. It's a warning against sentimentalizing the poor so as to make ourselves feel better. It's a warning against being so overwhelmed by the social problems around us that we end up doing nothing for anyone.

But the story is also a reminder that, as someone has said, "we are those who have seen a man raised from the dead and that in his name we are both able and committed to sharing water, love, and good news with all those in need."<sup>2</sup>

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

***Let us pray: Gracious God, you have given us a world of abundance, a land of plenty where all can have enough. We thank you for this prosperity. May we repent for our apparent inability to share this wealth. Righteous God, you hear the cry of the poor. You listen to those who do without. Help us to listen and hear and to see with our hearts. Touch our hearts that we may be faithful witnesses to your love and willing instruments of your justice and peace. Amen.***

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Among many sources about Schweitzer, I got some of the information from “Story Time: The Other Lazarus” at [www.andersongrove.org](http://www.andersongrove.org).

<sup>2</sup>David Lose, “On Stretching Parables,” September 23, 2013 at [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org).