

This summer on our Washington DC trip the senior high students and I racked up over 20 miles walking around the touristy part of town near the monuments, museums, and government buildings. While we were waiting at an intersection, a student from one of the other churches pointed out a series of iron rails that were cemented into the top of a low wall along the sidewalk where we were standing. He had noticed those dividers on ledges and benches all over that part of town. It took a couple leading questions, but his chaperone and I helped him figure out that those architectural features weren't for decoration but were to prevent homeless people from sleeping there. On any given day, there are more than 6000 people in DC who are homeless, just a fraction of the more than half a million people who are homeless in our country. But the DC city planners don't seem to want tourists to see the plight of the homeless in our nation's capital. Or maybe what they really don't want is for us to see ourselves in the mirrors of our comfortable homes after we have passed by homeless folks and not done anything to help.

Jesus tells today's parable in response to being ridiculed by the scribes and pharisees, whom he describes as "lovers of money." Like his other parables, it is intended to teach a lesson about the human condition, not accurately describe the afterlife. It's like the jokes we tell about St. Peter at the pearly gates or Ebenezer Scrooge meeting the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come—fiction, but pointing toward a truth. The parable includes two scenes: first this life, then the afterlife. In this life, a poor man, who is named Lazarus, lies at a rich man's gate, hungering even for scraps of food, while a rich man, dressed in fine clothes, feasts lavishly every day. The only compassion Lazarus receives comes from the dogs, who were regarded as an unclean nuisance in that culture. But in the afterlife, the roles are reversed: Lazarus is comforted while the rich man suffers. This is where things get really interesting.

We discover that the rich man was aware all along that a poor, ill man had lived at his gate; he apparently knew Lazarus or at least knew of him, because he refers to him by name. So the rich man wasn't ignorant of the need, just apathetic. But even in the afterlife, where he can see that Lazarus has been lifted up to a place of honor beside Abraham, the rich man still won't speak directly to Lazarus, not even to ask a favor. Instead he appeals to Abraham, asking him to send Lazarus to help. When Abraham explains that there's no way for Lazarus to help him, the rich man—who *even still* won't speak *to* Lazarus—persists in trying to order him around

through Abraham. He wants Lazarus go warn his brothers so they won't end up where he is. Abraham tells him they have the Law and the prophets, the same as everybody else; either they'll listen to them or they won't.

A few chapters earlier, Jesus tells a young lawyer that to receive eternal life he must love the Lord and love his neighbor as himself—and then goes on to define what it means to be a neighbor using the story of the Good Samaritan. This parable is another example of failing to love one's neighbor as oneself by failing to recognize who counts as a neighbor. Had someone asked the rich man who his neighbors were, we can imagine him listing other rich men like himself, whoever owned the next gated property on the block or whoever would have attended his sumptuous feasts. Yet literally, geographically, Lazarus is the rich man's closest neighbor because he lived right at the rich man's gate. The rich man, who in the whole story never speaks directly with Lazarus, never acknowledges him as a neighbor to be loved—only a provider of the services he wants. But he's probably not the only one; we can imagine the people whom the rich man would have considered his neighbors—the other rich men—stepping around Lazarus to get to their feasts, leaving him outside the gate where they wouldn't have to deal with him, feel any compassion toward him, or experience any guilt for ignoring him. If only the rich man had cemented some spikes or stakes beside the gate to make it too uncomfortable for Lazarus to lay there, so they wouldn't have had to see him at all.

This story absolutely convicts us when we have plenty but fail to share with those who don't—whether that's a personal failure or our complicity in systems that perpetuate injustice and inequity. But that's only a symptom of the deeper problem, which is failing to value every other person as a beloved child of God. If we could see how much God loves the one who is suffering, we would have to intervene. To love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind *and* our neighbor as ourselves is really just one commandment, not two; we can't love God while we ignore our neighbor, because the heart of our neighbor is where God has made a home. There could not have been a greater gulf between the rich man and Lazarus—not the chasm that separated them after death but the one that separated them in life: between the gate and the banquet table, between being covered in fine linen and being covered in sores. Yet, the rich man calls over and over to Father Abraham, which if we think about it, means that somewhere, deep down, he knew that he and Lazarus brothers. May God teach us not to limit who we count as our neighbor, then let us go love our neighbors as ourselves.