

The Invisible Man

Luke 16:19-31

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’ He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house—for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ 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.’”

One summer when I was in high school, I wanted to complete a summer reading project. We never had teachers who assigned summer reading, so I went out looking for a list of books; you know, those books that are so culturally significant that everyone should read them. And somewhere I found a list of 50 books every high school student should read. I don’t think I read all of them, but I made a pretty good dent.

One of the books on the list was *The Invisible Man*. Now, I didn’t look at the list too closely. I just saw the title, then went and found it at the library. I read *The Invisible Man* by H.G. Wells, the story of a man who is literally invisible. But in hindsight, I think the list was suggesting *The Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, a novel that describes growing up in a Black community in the south. The narrator considers himself to be invisible to society, because they see him only as a stereotype, not as an individual. H.G. Wells may be a famous author, but it is Ellison’s book that is considered a milestone in American literature. I read the wrong book.

But we see that same theme of an invisible person in our Scripture reading this morning. Jesus tells a parable about two men: an unnamed rich man, and a desperately poor man named Lazarus. Though the poor man lives right at the gates of the rich man’s house, they appear to inhabit two different worlds. The rich man was no ordinary rich man. He wore purple. It was

difficult during this time period to dye clothing purple. And it was expensive. So only the rich could afford to buy purple clothing. But the Romans had set standards regarding who could wear purple and how much purple they could wear. So this guy was a high-ranking official, or possibly even royalty. Moreover, he has a gate surrounding his property. The early version of a gated community.

Lazarus, the poor man, is the opposite of the rich man. He sits at the gate of the rich man – possibly in an attempt to beg money from the rich man, or possibly because he has no home and nowhere else to go. Lazarus is so hungry he would eat the rich man’s dog food. Instead of getting even the scraps from his table, the dogs come by and lick his sores. We should not be surprised that someone as poor as Lazarus is not only hungry, but also sick.

As Jesus is telling this parable, the crowd is already making judgments on these characters. But not the way you might think. We’ve heard a lot of parables in our day, so we kind of have an idea where Jesus is going. We’re pretty sure Jesus is going to tell the rich man to share what he has with the poor man. But the crowd gathered around Jesus was sure that things were the opposite of that. They were sure that God was pleased with the rich man and was unhappy with the poor man.

Many in the crowd would have believed that blessings in life were a sign, were proof of God’s favor. Likewise, poverty, illness or hardship were considered punishment or a sign of God’s displeasure. There are still people today who believe that. Right? They say, “If God is all-powerful, and if God is all-good, then how could God let bad things happen to good people?” If there’s any justice in the world, God will see to it that people are rewarded and punished according to their actions.

But Jesus' parable this morning turns that kind of thinking on its head. He continues telling the story, saying that both the men die. The poor man is with Abraham, which according to Jewish tradition, was the place of highest bliss in the afterlife. The rich man is within sight of the poor man, but instead of feeling bliss, he was suffering torment.

The rich man calls out to Abraham, asking him to send Lazarus with some water to cool his tongue. But Abraham explains that the rich man had everything he wanted in life, while Lazarus suffered. Now the tables are turned. We've heard Jesus say this before: The first shall be last, and the last shall be first.

Okay, so the crowd had it wrong. Blessings during this earthly life are not an indication of God's favor. If they were, the rich man would have ended up with Abraham. So does that mean then that the opposite is true? That if you suffer and have no wealth or blessings in this life that is a sign that God is pleased with you? That may be how things play out for Lazarus, but that doesn't seem right based on other things we've read about God.

Jesus tells his disciples to love their friends, but also to love their enemies. Shouldn't we expect the same behavior from God? In fact, Jesus also says that God makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. All people are children of God, and God treats them equally. But there's really no getting around the fact that this is a story about judgment. So why is the rich man judged negatively? And why is the poor man judged favorably?

Well, let's start with the poor man. The text is silent on what Lazarus did or believed. So we just don't know. This parable is really about the rich man. And the text is not silent about what he did. And to understand what his sin is, we need to look at the conversation he has with Abraham after he dies.

The first thing the rich man asks Abraham is to send Lazarus to bring him water. Then he asks Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers. Notice a trend here? Even though he is dead, and suffering torment, the rich man still thinks he's in charge! He thinks he can order Lazarus around. He doesn't ask Lazarus, he doesn't even talk to Lazarus. He speaks of him only in the third person while asking Abraham to let Lazarus be his errand boy.

The rich man's sin here is that he fails to see Lazarus as a real person. When they were both alive, the rich man wasn't mean or cruel to Lazarus. He didn't taunt him, or make life harder for him. But he failed to notice him. He walked past him every day, never taking the time to care about this fellow human being. The rich man's sin isn't just ignorance; it's arrogance and self-centeredness. And even after he dies, and the truths of the afterlife are revealed, he still doesn't get it.

If you've ever wanted to know what we will be like when we die, here's one hint. You will be the same person you were when you were on earth. The rich man still isn't a bad guy; he's just blind to other people. He's so consumed with himself and his life that he has no room to even notice others. The rich man never really repents or changes. And he knows that his brothers are also going to have a difficult time changing their lives.

Abraham tells the rich man that his brothers have the same Scriptures and prophets that Lazarus and everyone else has. And they are enough to show them the way. But the rich man knows that they weren't enough for him, and he's pretty sure his brothers will also be unconvinced. But the rich man thinks his brothers will be impressed if Lazarus rises from the dead and comes to tell them about their dead brother.

Now, you gotta love Abraham's answer. He says that if the brothers aren't convinced by the prophets, they won't be convinced even if someone rises from the dead. Remember it is Jesus

telling this parable. Jesus, the same guy who will be crucified, buried, and will then rise from the dead. Jesus is alluding to his own death and resurrection here. So he's essentially saying that he knows that even when he conquers death, there will be people who doubt it. There will be those who are unconvinced and who are unwilling to change their self-centered lives. It was true then, and it's true now.

One of the things I often ask you to think about when we read one of Jesus' parables is to ask where you fit in the story. Which character do you most identify with. And that's kind of tricky this morning. If we're honest, we can admit that we don't identify with the poor man. Some people here know what it's like to struggle financially, but no one here has had to deal with the kind of abject poverty that is described in our Scripture. And that's a good thing. No one should have to suffer like that.

Most of us can identify with the rich man on some level. Most of us consider ourselves to be middle class, but that's when we look only at other Americans. When we look at God's children around the world, suddenly we are richer than we think. But none of us are filthy, stinkin' rich. I'm not sure what's the modern-day equivalent of wearing purple, but whatever it is, we don't wear it. So there are limits to how we identify with the rich man.

But what if I told you we weren't supposed to identify with either Lazarus or the rich man? You and I – we are the brothers at the end of the story. Lazarus and the rich man are dead. They have made their choice, and it's too late for them to change who they are. But we, like the brothers, still have time to make a decision. We are called to love all of God's children: the good, the bad and the ugly. But we can't love anyone until we can see them. So we have to start by opening our eyes and choosing to focus on something other than ourselves. Amen and amen.