

Homily – Seeing With New Eyes

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Technically, I think we have had only two people in our parish who were legally blind, but in reality, we are all blind. You and I are all blind to the many blessings that God has already put around us and in us. Often we cannot see the beauty that surrounds us. But, let me start with a grandson story.

I first met Carter when he was five days old, and it was pretty obvious that he couldn't see anything yet. This is a normal occurrence in newborns, so it was nothing to be worried about.

I saw Carter again when he was two weeks old, and it was still obvious that he couldn't see much yet, but he was starting to stare at the Christmas lights that my daughter had on the wall behind her couch. And, you could bump your nose against his and Carter seemed to be looking back at you.

And, when he was four weeks old my daughter says there were times that Carter just seems to be mesmerized by her face. He stared and stared, so we knew his vision continued to improve at a normal pace.

And, I am told that baby's only see in black and white, and that at some point this shifts so that they see in color. Carter was not born with perfect eyesight, he had to grow into it. I think it is fascinating that human beings have to grow into seeing the world around them. This is both the physical world and the sacred world. We have to grow into the ability to see the sacredness of what is already around us. In some ways we are spiritual infants and don't see the way that God has created us to see.

Instead, we have stopped seeing the beauty that God has created around us. We only see people who look and act like us. We only see people who confirm our own goodness, and heaven help them if they make us feel something bad. They become the enemy or more frequently we just stop seeing them.

And, that is the problem of the rich man in today's parable.

Today we have a story from Jesus about a poor man named Lazarus, and rich man. Though he doesn't have a name in the story, the rich man has been traditional called "Dives" which is Latin for rich. And, both Lazarus and Dives die and go to very different places in a turning of the tables that we have come to expect from the stories of Jesus. The poor man goes to a good place and the rich man goes to a nasty place. In our contemporary twenty-first century way of thinking we would say that

Lazarus was with God and Dives was not with God. Dives was in a place in which he was separated from God. We would say that Dives is in hell, a state of being in which one is disconnected from God.

Now, there seem to be two ways that Dives has separated himself from God.

Notice that I said that Dives did the separating and not God. In my spiritual journey I am convinced that God is always present with us in this life and in the next, however, we often choose to separate ourselves from God in ways that dampen and impede our spiritual journeys. Like Dives, we can put ourselves into a state of being that is hell.

And again, I think there are at least two ways that Dives has gotten himself into hot water. Though it is not explicitly stated in the parable, it is likely that Dives' riches and wealth got in the way of healthy spirituality. The tragedy of wealth is that it can cause us to believe that we have full control and do not need to rely on God. Each of us has an ego or false self that demands control, and we only grow into healthy spirituality when we spend our lifetime letting go of our need to control.

Wealth is insidious. It gets in the way of the hard work we must each do to let go of our false self. Money can cause us to believe that we have earned our privileges, and it deceives us into forgetting that everything that we have is through the grace and unmerited blessings of God.

Dives is likely to have suffered his fate because his wealth got in the way of healthy spiritual living. It got in the way of healthy relationships with God, others, and self.

And, by extension, we have this risk as well. As twenty-first century Americans, money, wealth, riches, and possessions often get in the way of our healthy spiritual living. We often forget that our many blessings are from God. We are stewards and not owners, and we don't see the many ways that money puts a chasm between us and God. Using church language for a moment, riches and self-reliance cannot save.

Today's parable has something to say to us, doesn't it?

Now, I think there is a second way in which Dives has separated himself from God and put himself into hell.

It appears from our story, that Dives was blind to existence of Lazarus at his gate or doorstep. He would have walked by him many times a day, but Dives did not see Lazarus.

Dives is not depicted as evil, he just does not see the poor that are around him. He does not persecute Lazarus, nor does he refuse him food, nor does he sponsor legislation to rid the gates of poor people like Lazarus. The rich man is not wicked, instead he is blind. Dives did not see Lazarus. He does not see his needs, his state of being, or even his humanity. The poor man was not invisible, but the rich man was oblivious. Dives had his money and his possessions and his purple robes, and his extravagant feasts. Dives had all of these things, and he was blind to Lazarus who had none of these things. If Dives had seen Lazarus at his gate, and seen Lazarus as the beloved of God, might he have lived differently? Might Dives have shared some charity and compassion with Lazarus that would have improved both their lives?

And, even after death, when Dives finally saw Lazarus, he saw him as a tool to do something for him. The rich man was still blind to the value and worthiness that God creates in all, including the poor.

As rich people, we can go to amazing lengths to ignore the things and the people that we don't want to see, especially the poor. Our self-induced blindness lets us continue to live inside the bubbles and cocoons that we have built around us. This allows us to pay attention to only those things and people which validate our current way of thinking and being. Once again we are at the mercy of our ego and false self that clings to blindness so that we don't have to change or let go of control.

And with his blindness, Dives removed himself from healthy spirituality and moved himself to a place that was devoid of God. Dives placed a chasm between himself and God by being blind to the beauty and blessing that Lazarus could have been in his life. My spiritual director says that our greatest sin is not receiving the blessings of people that are already surrounding us. Let me repeat that. Our greatest sin is not receiving the blessings of people that are already surrounding us.

What are you doing to remove the self-induced blinders that we all have? Do you see that in our own day, the gap between rich and poor is widening?

The Good News for us is that we can remove our blinders and remove the associated barriers we have put into place that separate us from God. As Jesus demonstrates through his life, death and resurrection, there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God except ourselves. And, God will go to any length to be reconnected back to each and every one of us. God is determined, relentless and ultimately successful in crossing that chasm that we place between us.

There may be some initial pain in removing the blinders, dampening our egos, and changing the way that we live. But, the wonder and the glory is worth it.

When you open your eyes for the first time you finally see the presence of the sacred in the realities of everyday life. It is like there's a play you've been watching all your life, and suddenly you realize that the play you are seeing onstage is not the only play that's going on. There's an "underplay", with the same characters, but at a different level, with different logic and forces at work, and greater stakes. There's an egoic story to follow, as people move closer or further from their ego ambitions. But there's also a sacred story to follow, as souls move closer or further from their home, which is God. It's easy to be unaware of the "underplay", but once you see it, it's hard to see the other play about worldly ambitions as the ultimate reality. The main story is the soul story.

We may have been created to see this sacred story in our everyday lives, but at some point we go blind to it. Whether on the streets, on campus or in our cars, we are blind to some of the beautiful people around us. I wonder if the one place we are not blind is at our St. Barnabas Thrift Shop. Be that as it may, when we are blind we put a chasm between ourselves and God. Your invitation today is to realize that you are blind, and that there is so much more to see around you. You can move from a black and white way of seeing to a universe that is full of color. Some of you already see this way, and you can help the rest of us get there as well.

Make sure that you are not blind to the Lazarus's that are at your own gate or doorstep. In this way you are strengthening your vision of God in your own life and in the world. Live into a vision that is the way God sees you and sees the world.