

Rev. Larry Brown - Powell United Methodist Church

“Don’t Miss It”

My wife, Kelly, and I returned this past week from a road trip vacation. We explored the New England coast and had a lovely time in both seaport towns and beautiful forests. It’s really quite an extraordinary country in which we live, don’t you think? Vacations are especially good when they allow us to decompress and disconnect. That happened for us. Not that I didn’t think about you and the church. I did. It just wasn’t as often or in the same way as usual. Because we were on the road and in a different hotel room nearly every night we found ourselves comparing the hotels to each other. How soft was the bed? How clean was the shower? How sound was our sleep? How solid was the free breakfast? Our criteria, of course, was comfort and convenience. And then, one of the most serious decisions we had to make each day was where to have dinner. Like I say, vacations can be especially good. It’s a little bit like throwing darts in the dark, picking a restaurant in a place where you’ve never been. Technology really helped, as we relied on internet searches that rank eating establishments. We tried our best to eat dinner at places that had at least 4.2 stars or more. All in all, things went really well with both the accommodations and our meals, and that’s one reason why it was such an enjoyable trip.

One place we visited was Hyannis Port, Massachusetts. The Kennedy family compound is there and we wanted to see how close we could get to it. First of all, this mansion summer home of one of America’s most iconic families is well protected from tourists. We couldn’t even get a glimpse of it, as it’s surrounded by high hedges and beyond a row of smaller mansion homes along the coast. We also passed through Kennebunkport, Maine, where the Bush family has their summer place. We did see their compound from a distance, looking across a small inlet and pulling off the road in a line of other tourist cars to get our picture. That must be quite the life, having a summer place that warrants the term “compound.” As we visited those places, I experienced a surprising feeling, maybe even a bit of a thrill, to be that close to places that represent such position and power. It really is quite an extraordinary world in which we live, don’t you think?

As I’ve spent time with our bible reading for today the events of my recent travel stayed very much in my mind. It’s nearly impossible to hear Jesus’ story of the rich man and Lazarus and not feel convicted in your own heart. The rich man dressed in purple robes and feasted sumptuously every day. Oh sure, I could point to the Kennedy and Bush compounds and say, “What a display of extravagant wealth,” but the story hits closer to home for me, and maybe for you, too. The past couple of weeks my greatest concern was how soft the sheets were or how good the lobster was, but the fact is it really doesn’t take a vacation for all of us to recognize that our day to day lives are wrapped in all kinds of privilege. Wealth is relative, I know, but no matter who we are or how we live the story about the contrast between the rich man and poor Lazarus invites the kind of reflection that can rattle our souls. In what do we place our trust? What motivates our passions and desires? To what do we give our lives, and what is Jesus saying to us about the way we live, and who are the Lazaruses in our world? What is our response to them?

Responding to Lazarus is where the story takes a turn because the rich man did not. We may wonder if the rich man saw Lazarus at all. The story paints a graphic picture of the contrast between these two. Lazarus lays helplessly near the gate of the rich man’s place. How he got there we don’t really know but his agony means Lazarus hoped for even the scrapes that fell from the rich man’s table. This, of course, is the story’s deeper tragedy. There were no scrapes. Nothing was offered; no care for Lazarus’ wounds, no blanket for his back, no compassion for his suffering. Lazarus is all but invisible to the one who, wrapped in his purple finery, walked by him everyday. I come back to the way this story lays a conviction upon our own hearts. Who is it we do not see? What offerings have we not given? How does our concern about ourselves lessen our concern about others? If the story ended with just the contrast between the two men we’d have more than enough to think about. But, the story does not end there. The story moves us from this life to the life to come, and that’s when God gets into the act.

What happens in the story in the next life reflects what is true for all of us. We don’t take any of this with us. We’ve heard it said that death has a way of leveling the playing field but that’s not quite the case for the rich man and Lazarus. God works a great reversal. Lazarus is carried into the comforting arms of Abraham. The rich man finds himself in eternal torment. We say “We can’t take any of this with us,” and we are absolutely right but the things that shape us, the things that form our thinking and our response to others, the things that stir our passions, the things that make us who we are, these stay with us and they connect us from this life to the next. This is what Jesus is saying. He teaches the same elsewhere when he says that, “what we set loose in this world is set loose in heaven and what we bind up in this world is bound up in heaven.” (Matt. 18:18) There is an eternal quality in what shapes our hearts in this world. Now, in the story, the rich man was on a first name basis with Father Abraham. He believed. He saw himself as a part of God’s family. He had faith but Jesus is teaching that having faith isn’t enough.

How we live out our faith is what really matters, and Jesus doesn't want us to miss the opportunities we have each day to put our faith into action and make a difference, not only in our lives but in the lives of others.

This morning we are recognizing the important place the bible has in our Christian lives. We give bibles to our children each year, not just because it is a meaningful tradition but because we want our kids to know that the scriptures help us not just have faith but live it. What will living the faith look like for us this week? We mentioned that part of the rich man's problem was that he didn't see Lazarus. Wealth wasn't his main issue. It was blindness. What can help us live into our faith this week will be using our eyes in ways that looks at those in need from a different perspective. When we have opportunity to respond to those in need we usually think about what is being asked of us. The questions we ask are, in a way, concerned with self. What do I have that this person needs and am I in a position to give it? This is where we start in our decision process. Again, our questions lean toward the self-concern side. What do I have that they want and what do I have that I can give? Jesus' teaching opens our eyes to see from another perspective. If the rich man had seen it he would have experienced what Lazarus had to give him. Not worldly stuff, to be sure, but that fact was Lazarus was already a precious child of God and if the rich man's life had connected to Lazarus' life it's possible he would have experienced some of the love and compassion of God, enough so it could have begun to shape his priorities differently. When we come across those in need this week what might change in our priorities and responses if we asked what God is wanting to give us through them? Our encounters with those in need isn't just about what we have to give but what they have that we can receive. As in the story, this is where God gets into the act.

We don't want to miss that, how Jesus opens our eyes to see how his love is the bridge that connects us both to others and to the heart of God. Jesus wants that to happen for us in this life. Jesus wants that to happen in your life and in my life. May it be so. Amen.