

PENTECOST XVIII

Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm is fixed. Luke 16: 26

Rich man Dives he lived so well
When he died he went straight to hell
Poor man Lazarus poor as I
When he died he found a home on high.

You can hardly ever walk along Centre St downtown here without encountering someone begging. Usually sitting outside CVS with a Styrofoam cup.

What do you do? Give them your spare change, as they're asking? Say *sorry* and hurry by? Or just hurry by, eyes averted, pretending you don't see them at all?

If you're like me, you do all of the above at one time or another. If I have change in my pocket, I drop it in the cup. Or I say *sorry*. Or I hustle on.

I have a psychic friend who, when he sees someone he doesn't like approaching, says, *I'm practicing invisibility now*. I practice it myself sometimes. But since I don't have fourth dimension capabilities like my friend, I'm not sure how successful I am, or if I'm just rude.

But it occurs to me that when I scurry past the people living rough on Centre St, I'm also practicing invisibility. But who's invisible? They or I?

If we know anything about today's parable of Luke's, the gospel song I quoted may be what we know. It's one of Luke's least familiar parables, perhaps because it's among the harshest. But it deals with one of Luke's favorite topics: the allure and corrupting effects of money.

A story of reversals and contrasts. Lazarus, the poor man, has a name, while the rich man does not – the opposite of what we might expect. The rich man is dressed in purple, Lazarus, in sores. The rich man feasts lavishly, while Lazarus longs for the crumbs from the table. Lazarus's sores are licked by dogs, the rich man is licked by ... well, we'll leave that to the imagination...

But, by the end of the parable, Lazarus is looking down from heaven, while the rich man is looking up and begging.

The commentators on this parable always go to the vast chasm between the rich and the poor, between hell and heaven, and urge the preacher to focus on the scandal of inequity, the materialism of society, and the spiritual dangers of money worship. That hardly seems the sermon for us here at St. John's.

But one of the fascinating and pertinent things about the parable is this: the rich man doesn't *do* anything to Lazarus. He doesn't refuse food to the beggar at his gate. He doesn't drive him away from the gate, or set vicious dogs on him. He simply ignores Lazarus. He doesn't notice him.

That's the rich man's sin, evidently. That's what ends him up in hell. Obliviousness.

So if I'm to take this parable seriously, the third option I take with the Lazaruses on Centre St is the worst: the option of pretending they're not there.

I've just finished a detective novel about a British police officer who goes undercover to try to discover who's been murdering homeless men in London. He starts living on the street himself. He's somewhat of a rogue officer at the best of times, he's been depressed since the recent death of his father, a death he thinks he may have been responsible for, and living rough appeals to him in his guilty, morbid mood.

It turns out that the murders are related to war crimes of torture and murder by British soldiers in the first Iraq War. Now, sometimes I can barely pick up the thread of a detective story from one night to the next, but I've read others in this series, and there's a thread of karmic continuity from one book to the next.

In one, the police officer, Thorne, tortures a suspect with a hot iron to get information – obviously, off the reservation, legally and morally. Then, as possible payback, his father dies in a fire. And now, Thorne is uncovering evidence of torture on an international scale. What goes around comes around, and around, and around...

Of course what also happens to Thorne when he's on the street is that he makes connections, attachments. Calling his stoked up, strung out associates *friends* might be going too far. But he discovers their common bonds of humanity. He hears their delusions, their sorry stories, and begins to share their perspectives.

They become comrades. They drink crap beer together. They get one another's backs when danger threatens. By the end, the crime is solved, the perp is put away, there's possible hope for one no-hope couple of street people, and Thorne is cleaned up and back on the Job.

Some rough justice has been dealt. Some redemption seems possible. And all, as I take it, because Thorne began to see the people on the street, really *see* them, take them in.

I had a dear friend, Eva, who died almost 20 years ago. We used to get together for drinks and dinner and conversation every couple of weeks. One night, not so long before she got ill, she brought up, out of nowhere it seemed, the matter of people begging on the streets. "You can give them money, or not," she said. "And increasingly, I do."

I don't know why that random remark stuck with me, but obviously, it has. A kind of legacy from Eva. She knew that giving away change was tokenism, would not change the world. But it was something she could do, a symbol, a sacrament perhaps – an outward and visible sign of concern, of compassion, of *recognition*.

Has this memory changed my behavior? A little, maybe, not enough. But her concern haunts me.

We hear sometimes about *compassion fatigue*. It's a cliché, perhaps, but the phenomenon is real. Luke talks in his parable about a great abyss between hell and heaven. I'm not so sure about hell, but we are all aware of the great chasm between rich and poor, ever increasing in this country, a country that is supposed to be a land of promise.

And what can we do about it? The chasm certainly seems too deep and broad for any of us to cross, through effort or influence. What, realistically, can we do?

Well, we can vote our convictions, that's one thing we can do. Always vote, and vote for what our consciences tell us is right, even if it's not in our personal self-interest. And what may not be in our self-interest materially (retaining the sales tax at its current level, to take one obvious example) may in fact benefit us spiritually (not voting for a measure that would result in further cutting of social services.)

But another thing we can do, so simple and yet so difficult sometimes, is to take notice. To make eye contact with those sitting on the pavement or standing near shop doorways with those Styrofoam cups. At the very least, to acknowledge their presence, their humanity. And if we do make just that one trivial gesture, often someone will say back to us, *God bless you*. Amen.

