

DO WE SEE THE PERSON ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE GATE?

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 28, 2025

Jesus told a story about a rich man and a beggar. The rich man owned a large house situated on a large property with a fence around it and a gate out front. He had nice things and nice clothes and ate healthy delicious food every day. He had season tickets to the theatre and at Cool Today Park. Jesus does not give the rich man a name, but he does name to the beggar – Lazarus – who sits daily outside the rich man's gate begging, covered in sores, hoping to be given a few scraps that might fall from the rich man's table.

This story raises a question, "Do you and I see the person on the other side of the gate?"

Yesterday morning I sat with this familiar story for a while, becoming aware of a subtle feeling of discomfort slowly arising within me. Something in this story was unsettling me. But it took me some time to identify it. As I continued to work on this sermon, the probable cause of my discomfort came to me. And I'll explain what it was a little later.

In Jesus' story, we are not told whether the rich man had any reaction towards the beggar at his gate; he didn't appear to be disgusted at the sight of this sore infested man. He wasn't angry with him for not going out and getting a job. No, the rich man apparently had no reaction whatsoever. Lazarus was nowhere on his radar. The two of them never interacted. But Lazarus knew something of this rich man, because he sat outside his gate every day, obviously aware of the resources the man on the other side of the fence had. But sadly, it appears that this rich man in his comfort and daily routine and lifestyle was simply unaware of the man outside his gate. Unaware and indifferent to his suffering.

Gates and fences. They are put in place to keep some things out and other things in. The gates of a prison are in place to keep prisoners in. Gated residential communities are in place to keep some people out. I live within a gated community. Many of you do as well. Our gates keep unauthorized individuals and businesses outside. Now, I'm not saying that it's intrinsically wrong to have gates or locks to keep people out. I'm not encouraging you to keep the front door of your home unlocked so that anyone can come in whenever they choose. No, locks and gates and fences have their purpose.

But literal and figurative gates and fences can be a problem when they create barriers that divide and separate one from another; these people from those people; barriers that hinder us from seeing those on the "other side" of the gate.

In Jesus' story, the rich man has no given name, he is only identified as a rich man. But the beggar – Lazarus – is named. This is a subtle shift from many cultural norms where the well to do are usually the ones who are seen and known and admired, while those who sit at the side of the road or on the margins of society are often not seen and not known. They are frequently nameless faces whose stories remain a mystery to those who go about their lives around them. So Jesus is purposely turning the story upside down, making those who are usually unknown, known, and those who would be typically known, now remain unknown. He does this on purpose, to reveal the upside-down ways in God's realm, where those on the fringes of society are now elevated in status and gain added personal significance.

Now, let me get back to my own personal story of discomfort related to Jesus' story that I mentioned earlier. I think I was able to identify the source of my discomfort, or at least one of the sources. Two Sunday's ago, I was standing in the Parish Hall about ten or fifteen minutes before the start of the 10:00 service dressed in my vestments. One of our parishioners pointed

out a man who was new who needed some help. Immediately my intuitive radar kicked into gear. This was something out of the ordinary. As I spotted him, I observed that he was dressed a little more casually than most, and appeared to be a little disheveled. I approached him and introduced myself. He started into a very detailed story that seemed more and more implausible the further he got. As he continued to talk, I began to close the open gate between us. You see, I was feeling the pressure of needing to pray with the altar party and choir before giving announcements in just a few minutes. I was in a hurry and didn't have time for this conversation right then.

The thought also crossed my mind of other times when indigent people had chosen Sunday morning to appear at church as an opportunity to tell a story and hopefully open some purses and wallets. I explained to this man that our parish gives to an organization that we use as a clearinghouse of our support for those in need. I directed him to that resource, and he headed to the door.

Just like the beggar at the gate who was unseen by the rich man on the other side, this beggar in our parish was mostly unseen by me as he stood there on the other side of several figurative gates that I had erected between us; the gate of a time crunch, the gate of him looking different, the gate of lumping him in with that category of people who often take advantage of others.

Some of my initial discomfort in reading the gospel story had to do with the way I had handled this man, one of God's children, in those few brief minutes that Sunday. Yes, I was like that rich man, not seeing the person on the other side of the gate.

In our culture these days, there are sadly many gates erected that divide and separate one from another; these people from those people; gates within our society, gates between religions, gates within religions among those of differing theological understandings; Shia vs Sunni, Evangelical vs progressive. Our society has trained us to divide and differentiate us from them; hindering us from seeing each other as human beings with needs, from knowing each other, and caring for each other, and being One with each other.

Unfortunately, this has not changed over the millennia of time. In Jesus day the religious leaders and pious Jews divided and separated as well, excluding those considered unclean and the gentiles, locking the gate, leaving them out. But Jesus was never a gate closer, always a gate opener. He opened the gates wide by extending his movement of love to a Pharisee named Nicodemus and another named Saul, to the Tax Collector and the Roman soldier, the prostitute and leper and fishermen and tradesmen and professionals.

Jesus saw the person at the gate and welcomed them in. Do you and I see that person on the other side of the gate? The one who is in your church, who may be different than you, the one in your neighborhood, or where you shop.

My dear friends, life is too short, and God's kingdom is calling us to open wide many gates of separation and division; to get to know those on the other side of the divide and learn from them. For there is not much time to gladden the hearts of those who walk this journey with us. So, be swift to love. And make haste to be kind.