

Wesley United Methodist Church

September 29, 2019

“Clueless.”

Luke 16:19-31

Have you ever noticed that some people are absolutely clueless about some very important things?

There was a man who said that his wife doesn't complain often, but one day they were having an old-fashioned “heart-to-heart” talk. She said, “Hon, you never listen to me. Every time I talk to you, you get this far-away look in your eyes after only a few seconds. Please promise me you'll try to work on that.”

He says the last thing he remembers was saying, “I'm sorry, what was that you were saying?” I guess, many wives would allege that their husbands are clueless.

According to Pastor Rick Warren, there is a little structure deep in our brain stem called the reticular activating system. The reticular activating system is our brain's filter; it allows us to filter through all the sensory stimuli we receive and focus only on what is important to us. The reticular activating system allows us to filter out the snore of your pew partner, the hum of the air conditioner, the sunlight that filters through the windows, so that we can focus on the pastor's message.

Now there are three types of information that are so important that they automatically get through our built-in filter. The Three types that get through are the things that are unique, things that we value, and things that we find threatening.

Jesus told a parable about a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived on absolute luxury. At the rich man's gate lay a beggar named Lazarus. Lazarus was covered with sores. He longed to eat the scraps that fell from the rich man's table. He lay there day after day in misery. Dogs came and licked his sores.

Every day when the rich man left his estate, he had to pass by Lazarus. Do you think he ever paid attention to Lazarus? I doubt it. His reticular activating system probably filtered this poor man out of the scene. Lazarus was a nobody in the rich man's world. If he was noticed at all, it was probably as an object of disgust.

It is interesting, though, in Jesus' parable we know Lazarus' name. We don't know the rich man's name. Guess who counts in God's reticular activating system?

However, there came a time when the rich man did notice Lazarus. “The time came when the beggar died,” said Jesus, “and the angels carried him to Abraham's side.” The rich man also died, said Jesus, but he didn't go to Abraham's side. Instead he found himself in hell. From this realm of torment, he looked up and he saw Abraham far away. Then the rich man couldn't believe his eyes. There at Abraham's side was this poor beggar who had lain outside his gate, this man of no importance, this man of no consequence, Lazarus. But while the rich man suffered in hell, Lazarus was in glory.

Now this is a parable, not an allegory. We should not take this as a literal picture of heaven and hell. In this parable the rich man could look into heaven. And he could call out to Abraham, which he did. “Father Abraham, have pity on me,” he cried. “Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.”

The rich man still didn't get it, did he? He still thought Lazarus ought to serve him. He was absolutely clueless about the way the kingdom of God works.

Abraham reminds the rich man that in this world he had many nice things while Lazarus had none. And besides, he says, there is a chasm between heaven and hell that cannot be bridged. In other words, it was too late for the rich man. His fate was sealed. He had turned his head too many times ignoring the beggar at his gate.

The rich man still didn't get it. “Then I beg you, father,” he cried, “send Lazarus to my father's house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.” Abraham replied, “They have Moses and the prophets, let them listen to them.” “No, father Abraham,” said the rich man, “but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.” Abraham said, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”

It is a powerful parable. If we took it literally, it would even be a scary parable.

Let me ask you a question: Are there people in your world that you don't see? Needy people, hurting people, people who need your attention. Actually, they're everywhere, aren't they? Maybe within our own family. Or next door, or in the next cubicle at work. They may not be covered with sores. There may be no dogs licking their sores, but you can see the hurt in their eyes.

Have you ever been around a child who is starved for attention? They're on every playground. Some of them can be a nuisance. If they do not get the attention they crave, some of them can end up being a life-long problem for society. Who in their own family doesn't see them? Of course, children are not the only ones who are starved for attention, spouses, aging family members, shut-ins, people with disabilities. Our reticular activating system filters them out. They

are not on our radar. They can't serve our needs, so we don't even see them. It happens all the time. We're in a hurry. We've got places to go, people to meet, goals to accomplish and, we do not see what is right before our eyes.

The first thing we need to understand from this parable of the rich man and Lazarus is that love sees. The rich man passed the poor beggar day after day and never really saw him until it was too late. You and I need to train our eyes to see those around us. Being sensitive to others is not something that comes naturally to most of us. It's something at which we need to work. Love sees.

Not only did the rich man not even see Lazarus at his gates, there is no evidence that he ever did anything to help Lazarus' situation. All he did was turn a blind eye, but love acts.

And love heals. How often at a funeral have we seen people torn apart with guilt. They feel guilty not because they ever said anything mean about the deceased. Certainly, they had never abused their loved one except through neglect. "I should have been there. I should have done this. I should have done that, I just didn't realize...." How wonderful at such times it is to know that we did what we should have. We saw. We cared. We showed our love. There is healing in such knowledge.

We have no indication that the rich man was a bad man. He was just clueless. He didn't see. He didn't act. He probably spent eternity mumbling, "Where in the world have I been?" Let's not let that happen to us.