

Pentecost 21C
Peace, Seattle
September 25, 2016
Amos 6:1a, 4-7; Luke 16:19-31

SEEING LAZARUS

We saw them in every major city we visited and in smaller ones, too.

And we were warned by travel bloggers and local hosts that when we traveled by train, bus, metro, and through crowded piazzas, it was they, the Romani—the so-called “Gypsies”—we must keep our eyes on. For it was they who were responsible for most of the thefts in those crowded places; and they who would pose as beggars, or employ simple con artist tricks to get you to shell out your Euros.

“Watch out for their children,” we were warned, “they look younger than they really are. And beware of people in teams who stage arguments as diversion tactics to get at your valuables.”

So we watched.

I learned to look for people of that description and to regard them suspiciously. I became a racial profiler. And when we found ourselves traveling on packed buses and metro trains, or moving through crowded piazzas, we held our bags and the hands of our kids tightly.

Let there be no mistake, pick-pocketing and other forms of thievery are a real problem.

On the local train from Sorrento to Naples we witnessed a theft with our own eyes when, just before the train doors closed, a man tore a woman’s necklace right off her neck, and was out the door in seconds.

Was he Romani? I don’t know. But I DO know something felt wrong to me about the profiling I found myself caught up in. It made me feel like a prejudiced and paranoid louse, and I never grew comfortable with it even though I found myself accepting it as a necessary evil that seemed to come with the territory of international travel.

Our most memorable encounters with the Romani were in the city of Venice.

The streets of Venice are narrow, winding trails—at times no more than six feet wide—that grow wider in the retail areas of town and near the piazzas and smaller squares (campos).

Our lodging was in the less frequented northern side of Venice, and we would begin most days by threading our way south on a zigzagging route that took us to San Marco square.

As we walked that path we often saw beggars along the way.

One man was there every evening outside Santa Maria Nova Church. We’d turn the corner and there he’d be on his knees, his body as impassive as a statue, his eyes focused straight ahead, holding his cup.

But the encounter I remember most clearly was with a woman. She wore the thickly layered skirt, tunic and head scarf of the Romani, but how old she was it was hard to tell, for when we came upon her she was prostrate on the cobbled street, her forehead resting on the stones, the cup in her hands thrust out in what seemed for all the world to be a desperate act of prayer.

We could see nothing of her face; we couldn’t tell if she was awake or asleep—all that distinguished her from a discarded pile of rags were those brown, weathered fingers surrounding that cup.

We were a few paces past her when Chris stopped me, asked for coins, and returned to drop them in her cup. The woman didn't move. We had fruit and crackers leftover from our lunch in the backpack. Taking some, Chris placed them near the woman's outstretched hands and touched her gently. Startled, the woman lifted her head. And we were on our way again.

We knew nothing of this woman's circumstances or her family's story, and next to nothing of the story of her people. But that posture of hers!—legs folded under, head and chest flat to the ground, arms extended—communicated as much desperation as any of the paintings and frescoes we'd seen in Europe's great museums.

Today the themes of poverty and wealth collide once more in our readings and this time it gets personal.

First a seething Amos, in exact detail, paints a picture of excess among Israel's idle rich:

- Reclining on beds made of imported African ivory,
- Eating the meat of lambs and calves not yet weaned from their mothers,
- Drinking their wine not from cups but from bowls.

Justice and fairness have been replaced by an insolent security in their own prosperity. HOW THE LORD HAS BLESSED US! they say. NOT SO, Amos counters. YOUR END IS COMING SOON.

Then Jesus tells a story of two men on opposite sides of a gate with differing lives & destinies.

In telling the story Jesus won't allow us to stand back as dispassionate observers.

He insists that we come right up close—

- Close enough to see the rich man's luxuriant garments and to smell the aromas from his sumptuous table.
- Close enough to see the poor man's gaunt face, and to be grossed out by his leaky, festering sores.

Yet it's the poor man—the discounted one—who has a name—Lazarus—while the rich man has none.

In scene two the story takes us beyond death's veil, where a great reversal has taken place. The rich man is in Hades while Lazarus lies in Abraham's bosom.

During life, a gate separated them; now it's a great chasm. Yet in spite of this the rich man fails to fully grasp his changed status. He sees Lazarus now—perhaps for the first time—but still gives orders as if he's in charge.

Like many of the parables Jesus tells, this story holds up a mirror and asks us what we see.

It presents us with the great moral challenge of making visible the invisible suffering of the world.¹ In our globally connected world, scenes of suffering are more accessible than ever—only one click away. Yet, ironically, we've become ever more adept at ignoring Lazarus at our doorstep. Maybe these two realities are connected:

“The more we become voyeurs upon the faraway sufferings of others,” writes Scott Bader-Saye, “the more impotent we feel to do anything about pain and injustice.”²

¹ Scott Bader-Saye, *Feasting on the Word, Year C Volume 4*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010) p. 118

² *Ibid.*

When the sadness we experience, prompted by the suffering we see, reaches a certain limit, our overloaded sympathies shut down. We have only so much capacity to engage before we click to another site, turn the channel, or cross to the other side of the street.

But there's another dimension this story, too. For the reality is, we live within political and economic systems that feed upon the sufferings of others, all the while working to keep those suffering invisible.³

We all know about the sweatshops of Southern Asia and Central America—Los Angeles too—where women and sometimes children work like indentured servants for poverty wages, using their deft fingers to produce the clothing, rugs, and footwear craved by American markets.

A recent Associated Press investigation uncovered a similar phenomenon in Hawaii's lucrative fish markets where hundreds of undocumented men are employed on U.S.–flagged fishing boats. The boats owners use a federal loophole to exempt them from labor protections.⁴

Many of the fisherman come from impoverished Southeast Asian and Pacific nations to take the dangerous jobs, which can pay as little as 70 cents an hour.

With no legal standing on U.S. soil, the men are at the mercy of their American captains... Since they don't have visas, they are not allowed to set foot on shore. The entire system, which contradicts other state and federal laws, operates with the blessing of high-ranking U.S. lawmakers and officials.

[The prized swordfish and ahi tuna caught by the men on these boats] ends up at restaurants and premium seafood counters across the country, from Whole Foods to Costco. [If you buy Hawaiian seafood you] are almost certainly eating fish caught by one of these workers, who account for nearly all the fleet's crew.

The point is there are systems in place around the world, erected by governments and private enterprise, which conspire to keep Lazarus out of sight and out of mind.

Today's parable implores us to lift the curtains on these unjust practices. It reminds us in vivid terms that how we treat one another makes a difference both to God and to us. It matters.

But the point of the story is not to move us into a place of fear. Rather, in telling this story, Jesus helps us connect the dots between the faith we claim as our own and the way we actually live.

How's our eyesight? How good are we at seeing our neighbors? At responding to specific and personal needs and to the need for systemic change?

In the parable's final scene, the rich man implores Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers.

THEY HAVE MOSES AND THE PROPHETS, Abraham responds.

NO! cries the rich man, **BUT IF SOMEONE COMES TO THEM FROM THE DEAD, THEY WILL SURELY REPENT!**

³ Ibid.

⁴ Article by [MARTHA MENDOZA](#) and [MARGIE MASON](#) published in the Seattle Times September 7, 2016: <http://www.seattletimes.com/business/hawaiian-seafood-caught-by-foreign-crews-confined-on-boats>. What follows is excerpted from that article.

And Abraham concludes, IF THEY DO NOT LISTEN TO MOSES AND THE PROPHETS, NEITHER WILL THEY BE CONVINCED EVEN IF SOMEONE RISES FROM THE DEAD.

We worship a risen Lord. A Lord who makes visible what once was invisible.

A Lord who opens our eyes to the suffering in our midst and to the unjust systems which undergird it.
A Lord who having risen from the dead raises us up to embody compassion in the world.

We are church for the sake of the world! We are Christ's hands and feet—as well as his heart!

This is our calling; this is his gift. To be his Body in the world, sharing his abundant life so that others might have life; responding with generosity to all those suffering faces which become, for us, the face of Christ himself.

Amen.