

## **Pentecost 16. Luke 16: 19-31**

We are called to have eyes that see; and hearts that are moved with love.

Jesus told a story of two men; each on opposite ends of the social and economic spectrum; one man an example of extreme opulence and the other man an example of bitter poverty. He told the story of a rich man and a beggar named Lazarus.

But before I get to that story, let me tell you another story of two different men; Stephen and Mike:

Stephen Clark grew up in an upper-class home. His father, through a lot of hard work had established a prestigious law firm and raised his family on Cape Cod. The family attended St. David's Episcopal Church where dad spent several years on the vestry and had contributed generously to an education wing of the parish. Young Stephen was accepted into Columbia Law School where, after graduation he planned on joining his father's firm and planned on eventually making partner.

As a young man he met Rachael, they married and began a family. Over the course of years of hard work and long days, Stephen eventually obtained his goal and was made partner. He finally reached the degree of financial comfort that met his family's needs.

Stephen retired at 64 and he and Rachael moved to a comfortable 3,500 square foot home on Casey Key overlooking the waters of the Gulf. They bought a boat and enjoyed days on the beach and fishing. Stephen also served and worshiped at the local Episcopal parish.

Now that you have the bare bones of Stephen's story, let me tell you about Mike's story, and eventually we will discuss the connection between the two men. Mike was an Army brat. His dad served twelve

years, being stationed on four different bases. Mike attended two elementary schools and two High Schools. He struggled through school due in part to the upheaval experienced from moving frequently, as well as growing up with an absent father while dad was at times deployed elsewhere. Mike followed his father into the military, spending four years in the Marine Corps during Operation Enduring Freedom. He came home with 25% military disability and an alcohol problem he could not lick. He held various jobs, but struggled with focus, a short fuse, and lack of interest. Mike was now thirty-five years old, but he was often mistaken as a man of fifty; sporting a matted grizzly beard, calloused hands, and leathery brown skin from hours in the Florida sun. Mike survived on an occasional odd job, the kindness of friends, and the fish he would snag as he spent some hours casting off the Blackburn Point bridge.

Often as the sun began to settle into the waters of the gulf, Mike would be seen with his old bicycle leaning against the guardrail, his weathered torn backpack on the ground and his few personal items in bags on the back of the bike as he finished casting his rod for one last bite before calling the end to another mind numbing, dirty, sweaty day.

As Mike's line and lure entered one last time into the water, Stephen and Rachael were heading up 41. As they hung a left onto Blackburn and into the setting sun, he would often day dream as he thought back with fondness on the blessings God had bestowed on their family. Oh, it had not been an easy life. The long days at Columbia obtaining his JD degree. Sixty- or seventy-hour work weeks reaching for partner in the firm. The times he missed with his children as he worked into the night. And yet, the result was a beautiful home, healthy living, the ability to send his kids to college, and a comfortable retirement in Osprey. Life has been good. As the Beemer rattled over the bridge and onto the Key, he would occasionally catch a glimpse of an old rat-trap bike against the rail, a weather-beaten face and dirty arms casting into the water.

Usually there was no second thought in Stephen's mind about this man, but once or twice he would look at the man and think; well, each man chooses his own life.

Before continuing with Stephen and Mike's story, let me return to today's Gospel story. Luke recounts the tale Jesus told of a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen. At his gate sat Lazarus, a beggar.

The only information we have of the rich man is his garments; purple and fine linen. Purple in nature was very rare, and the expense required in making purple dye made purple garments a status symbol; something only worn by the very rich and those of noble blood.

We are told that this rich man of high status would return home, pass through his gate, and settle in for a sumptuous feast prepared by the servants. Meanwhile, as the sun was beginning to set and the table was laid out, the scents from each succulent dish began to drift on the breeze over the grounds to the waiting nostrils of the silent figure Lazarus disheveled, filthy and sore infested, crouched at the gate. Luke's gospel records: "And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table;".

Jesus story continues with both the rich man and Lazarus eventually dying. Lazarus was taken to be with Abraham in paradise, while the rich man suffered in agony. In the ending of the story we read these words spoken by Abraham to the rich man: "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony." The moral of this story may be; you reap what you sow, or "do unto others as you would have them do unto you".

One final interesting point in Jesus story of the rich man and Lazarus the beggar, is that the rich man is given no identity, he has no name, whereas the beggar at the gate is named; Lazarus. In our world, the opposite is always true. It is the rich and famous; the well-to-do that are known and named. Whereas the poor and homeless are a nameless mass of humanity. They are just mentally ill, or alcoholics. Jesus flips this reality on its head by giving dignity and identity to those who were often just a nameless, invisible presence.

Let me return now to the story I began with; the story of Stephen and Mike. Stephen, the attorney was enjoying his retirement in Florida and his spacious home on Casey Key. Mike, meanwhile, was moving from flop house, to flop house, often ending his days fishing off the Blackburn Point bridge.

Stephen's local Episcopal parish began a Wednesday night series on social justice, and the important work of bringing God's Kingdom here-and-now into our world. Soon after the series began, Stephen and his wife Rachel took their familiar route home up 41 and left on Blackburn. As they approached the bridge, Stephen barely caught a glimpse of a figure ahead in the shadows with rod and reel. How many times had Stephen passed this way? How many times had he passed this man? It must have been at least a couple dozen times. This time a thought floated to the surface in his mind. I wonder what his story is. Is there more to this man than what I see? Something changed that evening, not only in Stephen's mind, but in his heart as well. Stephen felt his heart stir. As he turned left down the Key and into his driveway, a plan was starting to form in his mind. He was starting to feel giddy with excitement. As he and Rachel walked into their home, Stephen shared his plan with his wife.

Over the next few weeks Stephen began to look for this weather-beaten fisherman; to discern his pattern; what days would he show up on the bridge? What time of day?

He hatched a plan. On a late summer afternoon Stephen raised his garage door, took his bicycle off the rack, put on his helmet and with his heart beating faster from apprehension, and his soul burning with excitement, he headed north to the bridge. As he approached the figure casting his rod, he noticed the weary look in Mike's eyes as the vet watched the man closely. For a split-second Stephen was tempted to peddle on past, but the Holy Spirit was speaking louder. He smiled, pulled over and set his twenty-one speed up against the rail next to Mike's old, scratched bike. They struck up a conversation about fishing; something both men had in common. Over several weeks that followed, the two would often meet up in the same spot. Once-in-a-while Stephen's wife would make a couple sandwiches for the two men to share on the bridge. Stephen began to tell Mike about his life. Mike slowly began to open up about all the twists and turns of his story. Stephen began to sense that this road-worn, young vet was his brother. He was feeling a deep love for him. He sensed that it was the love of Christ. Just like the scales that fell from Saul's eyes after being blinded on the road to Damascus, the scales were falling from Stephen's eyes. He was seeing all of humanity in a way he never had before.

There are those who cross your path who may be your Mike. Mike may be the homeless guy on the corner of your subdivision. Mike may be the cashier who regularly checks you out at Publix. Mike may be your landscaper, or the person in the pew across the way.

Each one of us walk through life with scales on our eyes. Our vision is often clouded. We often do not see, really see, the person in front of us; whether it's that person in church you never really got to know, or the one who rubs you the wrong way, or the cashier, or the homeless

person. God wants you to get to know the Mike's in your life better. To hear their story. To understand them better. To begin to feel in your soul a love for that person that God feels.

Let me end with the words of Presiding Bishop Michael Curry in his forward to Jim Wallis's new book, "Christ in Crisis" Bishop Curry, in speaking of the way of Jesus said this: "Whenever Jesus of Nazareth – his actual teachings, his lived example, and his living, liberating, and life-giving way - takes center stage, a revolution of love, a reformation of life, and a renewal of our relationship with God, each other, and all of creation is at hand . . . (Bishop Curry continues by saying) Now is the time to reclaim that Jesus who was unafraid to sit with those who others considered unacceptable, unwilling to be co-opted by the powers that be, undeterred in reaching out to the friendless and the needy, the cast down, the put down, and the disinherited."

May we learn to truly see one another through the eyes of Jesus of Nazareth. May scales fall from our eyes. May God's clear vision of love be ours.