

Sunday, September 29, 2013: Luke 16:19-31

by [John K. Stendahl](#) in the [September 18, 2013](#) issue

Years later I still feel the shame. I was visiting a young man in a facility for people with severe brain injuries. He was agitated and eager to walk, so I joined him as he went from room to room and looked in each room as if he were searching for someone. Eventually we came to a big room that was not in use. At the far end a couple of janitors were at work buffing the floor. I saw that no one was sitting at any of the tables and said to the young man, “There’s nobody in here.”

Then, from the other side of the room, came the voice of one of the janitors. “What do you mean, nobody? We’re not nobody.”

I don’t recall what lame apology I offered, but I remember the heat rising in my cheeks. I really hadn’t seen those two men, although of course I’d registered that there were janitors at work. My mind was elsewhere.

I suspect that the rich man didn’t really see Lazarus either, although this poor man was right there at his door or right under his nose, as we say. The rich man was concerned with other things. He saw Lazarus, of course—enough so that he could step over him and not stumble. Perhaps he thought for a moment about the problem of the poor, or considered the difficult question of whether it’s good or bad policy to give money to beggars. Maybe he even dropped a coin in the man’s hands as he moved past him. But he didn’t really see Lazarus.

And if he didn’t see Lazarus, he didn’t see the enormous chasm that existed between them. The rich man lived in his own universe and the poor man was just a detail within it, like those janitors were to me even though they were no more than 15 yards away. In Jesus’ story, of course, the chasm did become evident to the rich man when he found himself on the other side of it. With opened eyes he saw Lazarus as the child of Abraham, and so he saw the chasm of separation. But by then it was too late.

Twenty years later I’m grateful for the shame of my experience. I’m grateful to the janitor who challenged me and for the voice and the words that made me see. The memory continues to teach and warn me. Once I was confronted with my blindness,

I was forced to recognize that class and race and self-centered preoccupation had far greater power over me than my kindly liberal intellect had perceived. Called to see, I saw the gap between myself and the other side of that room.

Years later I was part of a group of clergy meeting with the CEO of a large Boston bank. We had come to advocate on behalf of janitors striking for decent working conditions from cleaning companies that contracted with the owners of the bank buildings. There was a big gap between the bank and the dispute, but the banks could apply leverage on behalf of the janitors, and we were asking this CEO to do so. We began by telling something personal; I shared my story about the janitors. It seemed to strike a chord; the banker said he realized that he never saw the people who cleaned his office, that he didn't know their names or anything about their lives. He left every night and in the morning everything was clean and neat, but he'd never given the workers a thought.

Some of those commenting on the Trayvon Martin tragedy have used the phrase "neighborhood watch" for what George Zimmerman was doing. Here again it seems to me that the kind of "watching" exercised in this situation involved a fatal blindness to a neighbor, a way of seeing that was actually a failure to see.

As I think about situations and chasms that separate us from each other, I feel the urgency in Jesus' parable. There was a chance for redemption for the rich man if he'd only seen it in time, but now the chasm was fixed forever. When the rich man pleaded for a warning to be brought to his brethren he was told that they had already received sufficient warning. "They have Moses and the prophets," Abraham said. That was enough. Yet the story that Jesus was telling went beyond that insufficient sufficiency. Jesus was trying once again to get it across.

I had Moses and the prophets and Jesus and a nursing home janitor tell me, but I still need reminding. Perhaps Jesus, in his tireless efforts to try to open eyes and close up gaps, sometimes thought that there would be no point in coming back from the dead because people still wouldn't get it. Yet he was finally willing to try even that, crossing the greatest chasm of all to confront us. It seemed a hopeless plan, but he was desperate to reach us. That desperate idea moves me. I hope it works.