

On not noticing: White privilege and white blindness

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A parable that Jesus tells begins this way. "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores" (Luke 16:19-31).

This is all we are told about either man prior to their deaths. Lazarus ends up in "Abraham's bosom" while the rich man is tormented in Hades. Nothing is said about what accounts for their different fates other than these words spoken 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." There is also a note about how "Moses and the prophets" should be more than enough to prevent the fate suffered by the rich man.

Without this note about Moses' law and the prophets, the rich man's only sin would seem to be his wealth. Jesus actually says as much in Luke 6:20-26: "Blessed are you who are poor ... But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation." That fits exactly with what happens to Lazarus and the rich man. But if the law and the prophets could have provided some warning, there must more to the parable.

Lazarus' location seems to be the key. He lay right there at the rich man's gate. He was aware enough of the rich man that he longed for the scraps from his table. But the rich man apparently took no notice of Lazarus. The law and the prophets required helping the poor, feeding the hungry, caring for those in need. But this rich man passed by every day without even noticing. Nothing in the parable suggests he was a particularly cruel man or that he acted out of great malice. But he did not help. Because he did not see?

Jesus' parable draws on a division of rich and poor that is still with us. But if Jesus were walking around telling parables today, I wonder if he might choose a different

division, one of white and black. Surely Jesus would never say, "Woe to you who are white." But then again, why would Jesus condemn everyone who happened to be rich? In Jesus' day, most simply would have been born into that state.

The point of Jesus' parable seems to be about not noticing, not seeing. And that is a huge issue for those of us born white. Many of us assume that the way we experience life is how everyone experiences it. When someone speaks of "white privilege" we cringe. What privilege? We've not experienced any special privileges; we've just lived our lives. And because for so long whiteness defined life in this country, we have felt right in our views. But we've never really seen what it is to be black. We can be as blind to that as the rich man was to the experience of Lazarus.

I've not needed much convincing that white privilege is a real problem in America, but that doesn't mean I truly see. I really cannot imagine that if my car broke down a police officer who stopped to investigate might even consider shooting me. So when that does happen, surely there must have been something other than blackness involved. Surely some action made the shooting more likely.

I recently read *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates. It moved me more than any book I've read in a long time because it opened my eyes. By that I mean that it allowed me to see as another does, to experience a terrible fear and dread and anger that I have never known in my lifetime of middle-class whiteness. I wonder if I didn't experience something akin to what the rich man felt when he actually saw Lazarus for the first time (if in fact he ever did; read the parable yourself and see what you think).

The mostly white Presbyterian Church I grew up in was generally sensitive to the needs of the poor. Despite many failures, it has tended toward more progressive stands on race and civil rights. But that does not mean we see. Far too often, we have assumed that if we just weren't overtly racist or prejudiced, everything would get better and be fine. All the while we were blind, oblivious to our own privilege, not noticing the plight of our neighbor.

But the news assaults our blindness. Regularly we are confronted with evidence of what we have not seen, of what we have walked right by without noticing. Some are clinging to the blindness, like addicts clinging to their addiction and insisting there is nothing wrong with them. But more and more of us are beginning to see. At least I hope so. God, I hope so.

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