

September 25, Ordinary 26C (Luke 16:19-31)

God keeps sending the message that there's a better way.

by [Audrey West](#) in the [September 2022](#) issue

I visited a church where large courtyards and breezeways create a protective haven for a handful of people experiencing homelessness who sleep there each night. Nestled alongside walls in the cold months and in the shade in the summer, the small community seems to find a measure of comfort. By an agreement forged with the church's leaders, they arrive after the workday ends and leave the next morning before it begins. As they gather their few possessions each day, a church member distributes simple bag lunches to carry with them.

The arrangement has worked so well that more people are seeking shelter on the church's property. Unfortunately, a rift is developing between the church and some neighbors who do not want the church's overnight guests so close to their homes. Hoping that familiarity might bridge the gap, the pastor invites neighbors to meet them and learn their names. Still, complaints have rolled in to the city council, which has formed a task force to "look into the homeless problem."

Recently a local resident posted on social media: "You know you're from here if you've never seen a person who is homeless." Is this post intended to be ironic? Or does it represent the writer's lack of awareness? In either case, it is an indictment of people who turn away from the plight of their unhoused neighbors or refuse to recognize their need.

Their stance is nothing new. Every day on the way in and out of his gated compound the rich man in this week's parable steps right past a poor man covered in sores, apparently paying him no mind. Lazarus is not hidden from him, shielded behind a grove of trees or huddled beneath a highway overpass or sheltered by a church courtyard. He lies there in plain sight, on the pathway in front of the house, where the rich man and everybody else can see him. He is so familiar that passersby no longer notice him there.

In contrast, the rich man calls attention to himself with expensive purple garments and fine linen. He shares family characteristics with his parabolic cousin, the man with crops so abundant that he tears down old barns and builds new ones in order to keep the surplus for himself. He is self-absorbed, pleased to show off his splendid possessions, and seemingly oblivious or unconcerned about how his prosperity could make a difference for others.

Instead of killing a fatted calf or inviting the neighbors to a party, like the father of the Prodigal Son or the woman who finds her lost coin, the rich man enjoys private, sumptuous feasts that rival the barn-building man's insatiable appetite to eat, drink, and be merry. If the rich man manages to think of anybody else, it is only his closest relatives, and even then his concern comes too late to make a difference for them.

At the end of the parable Abraham reminds him that anyone who ignores Lazarus or others who suffer ignores also the law, the prophets, and even the one who will rise from the dead. These emissaries are offered as a package deal, through a sweeping message that finds expression throughout the whole of scripture.

The Torah commands care for the poor, love for both neighbor and stranger, and the provision of food for the needy. The prophets warn of consequences for our failure to do justice for each of these. God keeps sending the message that there is a better way. But when we have more than enough, it is easy to become distracted from the things of God.

Jesus aims this parable at everyone who knows they will still have food next week and a safe place to sleep night after night. A chasm expands among us every time we ignore another's needs and revel instead in our privilege, good fortune, or success. The parable reveals God's desire to get through to everyone, even after so many human failures.

But Jesus tells it especially for the sake of all the Lazaruses of the world, for everyone who gazes with longing at the crumbs that could sate their hunger or a space to rest their head. He tells it so they will be seen.