

## **“The Other Side”**

**Sermon on Sunday, September 25, 2022**

**Dear church,**

“The other side” is my sermon theme for this morning. The other side can be such a teaser, when a Tabu is involved. Children want to see what’s behind the locked door, the forbidden cabinet. They want to crack the secret code. And I can relate to that. I’m sometimes curious like a little child. I also grew up in a country that was divided by a wall and two opposing ideologies. Growing up in Western Germany, you never went over to the eastern side, unless you had relatives there, which I didn’t. But you bet I was curious about life on the other side of that infamous Iron Curtain, where people had only limited access to free media and weren’t allowed to travel to the west.

Then, two years before the old order of things finally tumbled down, I had the opportunity to go there and see for myself, an unforgettable trip in 1987. It was like going into forbidden land, observing first-hand the gray landscapes of communist Germany and the resiliency of some of its suppressed people who were secretly critical of their regime, hoping for more freedom. It was maybe the most important travel experience of my life, and I have had a few. See, crossing over to the other side is an absolute must when you want to know more about life. It does something to us. It changes us in some way. It makes us think differently. Has there ever been a wise woman or a wise man who hasn’t looked at life from different angles or better yet, experienced life from different vantage points? I doubt it.

That’s why this story from the gospel of Luke with its super-dramatic contrasts between crushing poverty and luxurious living, between hell fire and paradise, is important. It begs us to go to the other side from time to time. And it makes no bones about the fact that people’s interest in the welfare of other human beings on the other side of life’s fortunes isn’t as common as God would like it. When poverty or perceived danger is involved, more affluent people are and probably always have been reluctant to move out of their safety and comfort zones. That’s a fact. I don’t see the rich man in this story as an anomaly.

Yes, he may be portrayed as a callous jerk in but I'm afraid in real life he is more common, much nicer, more normal. He could be your golf buddy. It could even be me, dare I say? The disciples asked at the time of the last supper when Jesus told them about someone who would betray him, "Is it me, Lord?" In the same way I ask myself her: "Is it me Lord?" This attitude of the rich man in this story, the ignorance, the looking away, is not so different from significant parts of our culture if we are honest, and we should be honest with ourselves.

His attitude says, "Why venture into someone else's misery if you don't have to?" Maybe because there is an ethos shared by almost every religion on earth, dubbed the "Golden Rule," that demands that we treat others as we would want to be treated in the same situation. And that takes some effort and imagination. The rich man in this story probably can't even imagine what it is like to be poor. To find out about that he would have to go and talk to Lazarus, maybe even be touched by the sick man who has been lying in the mud, get involved. But he can afford to look away; he can simply send a servant or have someone remove the beggar from the side of his property. He doesn't have to get involved, he doesn't have to feel what life is like on the other side, the poor side, the scary side, the dark side. I think that sense of privilege is common among us if we are honest, and we should be honest with ourselves. Because there is no point in listening to this parable unless we become a bit more curious and willing to find out what people's lives are like on the other side!

Even in churches, the divisions dictated by systems of inequality can be amazingly resistant to change. Our council member Maureen Tang is currently involved in a synodical committee to help address the income gap that has long existed between pastors in poor communities and those who serve more affluent neighborhoods in our own synod here in PA... That gap was there 25 years ago when I began my work in this synod and it has only gotten worse, I'm told. The issue hasn't been touched or seriously addressed for more than a quarter century, and I would say with all due respect that is shameful to be honest; and we should be honest with ourselves.

So, what do we make of this story, which is in the classic mold of the turning of the table fantasy? What if the tables were turned? What if I were in your shoes? What if you were in my shoes? Life is not just about being happy and well taken care of by yourself, for yourself - at least not in the gospel according to Luke. In Luke, Jesus always encourages us to go to the other side, to find out what is there, and be willing to meet people where they are. I hope that the work of justice and social ministry isn't just something we as a church delegate to the few who deeply care about it; my hope is that we all partake in it. Because: the other side is where we grow. Where it hurts is where we often grow. That's the way of the gospel. And there is still room for growth in all of us if we are honest with ourselves, and we should be honest.

**Amen.**