

## ***At Our Gates – Luke 16:19-31***

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Near the neighborhood I live in is a large home situated on a hill encompassing several acres of land. The home is beautiful and stately, the land occupied with beautiful trees. You can only see it from the road in front of it, however.

You see, there's a gate at the front of the driveway that remains shut at all times, preventing anybody without access from getting close. And that gate is only able to be opened by electronic code, and it has security cameras hovering around it.

It's understandable why such a valuable piece of property would be gated. There's much for the owner to keep an eye on. Passersby, like on any piece of private property, are not welcome there without granted access.

The gate, however, does reflect a dividing line. Inside the gate, the owner enjoys the safety and familiarity of what he or she owns—a luxurious home and beautiful piece of land. Outside the gate, though, is what he or she doesn't see—in rare cases, the people who might venture onto the property uninvited without the deterrence of the gate.

And because the gate is there and because it and the front of the driveway are far removed from the house, it's hard for the owner to see what's on the other side of the gate—the many, many cars that go by on that road and, sometimes, the occasional bicyclist or walker who risks well-being by travelling on that busy shoulder-less road.

What the owner of that estate also most likely doesn't see, and what all of us don't see either in our community, according to

Jesus in this parable, is the recognizable suffering of the poor at our gates.

Our wealth, while rightly earned and enjoyed, often clouds us from paying attention to those at our gates.

Last Sunday here, in our treatment of the parable of the dishonest manager, we learned of the difficulty of understanding that story. This week, the parable of the poor man and Lazarus is challenging as well, not because its meaning is hard to grasp, but precisely because its message is crystal clear: It's not too late to pay attention to the needs around us—at our own gates. And it's important that we do so.

In the opening scene of this story, the wealthy man doesn't see or pays no attention to the poor man Lazarus, hungry and covered with sores.

In the second scene, both men have died and Lazarus finds his place with Father Abraham in heaven, while the rich man is resigned to Hades. The tables are turned, and the rich man is now the beggar, begging for relief from the flames of hell.

Abraham says, "Sorry, you had your chance to do good with your great wealth, and you didn't. And it led you to this place. And the chasm between you and Lazarus is now so great that nothing can be done to bring you relief."

And the same went for the rich man's brothers, who the man desires to have warned by Lazarus so that they don't suffer a similar fate.

"No," said Abraham, "they have Moses and the prophets. They should listen to them."

And what would it have been that Moses and the prophets would've said to the brothers? The same thing that God and

God's messengers would say to us today: notice those at your gates and take care of them.

I don't have to tell you all how difficult it is to lead the lives God calls us to lead. The world says, "Just enjoy your life. It's all about you." Whereas, God says, "Be part of this movement of being disciples and give all that you have to help others."

Noticing the people at our gates is not simple nor free of investment. Yet, Jesus, when he said, "Love your neighbor as yourself," made this an imperative.

And don't we know the world could use more of this selfless giving.

Twenty years ago, when Bono, the lead singer of the rock band U2, made it a personal mission to rally the world to eradicate AIDS in Africa, he said, "I think Judeo-Christian culture is at stake. If the church doesn't respond to [the AIDS crisis in Africa], the church will be made irrelevant. It would [be] like the way you heard stories of people watching the Jews get put on the trains during the Holocaust. We will be that generation who watched our African brothers and sisters get put on the trains.

"'Love thy neighbor' is not a piece of advice — it's a command. Christ talks about the poor [and says] 'whatever you have done to the least of these brothers of mine, you've done to me.' In Africa right now, the least of my brethren are dying in shiploads, and we are not responding."

As it would turn out, Bono, the church, and the U.S. government did act in big ways to greatly reduce the number of AIDS infections in many African states. It was a rare case of, at least on a global scale, those of means seeing those at their gates.

Today, there's merit in government doing what it can to rid itself of waste, fraud, and abuse when it comes to taxpayer

money. U.S. foreign aid has deservedly had the spotlight put on it for such a purpose—we should be taking care of our own first, the argument goes. Valid point.

And yet, there's legitimate worry, too, that U.S. aid that has helped needy neighbors to survive in far away places for decades has been scaled back to a degree that vulnerable populations are being negatively and severely impacted by these cuts.

Even wealthy countries with deficiencies and imbalances at home should not miss those at our distant gates.

Texts like these in the gospels, texts that implore us (usually Jesus' words) as individuals and as a body of believers to give and sacrifice and serve others are not my favorite texts to preach on. I'd rather just talk about how much Jesus loves us. He really does, and we can't hear that too much. And it just makes us feel better, especially when we're living through tough times. It's so comforting.

Well, it's because Jesus loves us so much that we should feel compelled to notice those who are at our gates, those who need food, those who need medicine, those who need care.

In our Reformed tradition, the doctrine of justification by faith alone reminds us that our salvation comes only through our faith and trust in God. Our good works are not the basis of our salvation; our good works are the evidence of our salvation, the response to a loving God who says "I love you" every day.

Our good works, our seeing those at our gates, is part of our DNA. It should never stop.

"Every moment and every situation challenges us to action and to obedience," writes Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *The Cost of Discipleship*. "We have literally no time to sit down and ask ourselves whether so-and-so is our neighbor or not. We must get

into action and obey — we must behave like a neighbor to him. But perhaps this shocks you. Perhaps you still think you ought to think beforehand and know what you ought to do. To that, there is only one answer. You can only know and think about it by actually doing it. It is no use asking questions; for it is only through obedience that you come to learn the truth.”

That truth is that the love of Jesus comes at a cost—the cost of loving others as we love God in return.

On the way home from church one day, a little boy asked his mother, “Is it true that we are made of dust?”

“Yes, buddy, we are.”

“And do we go back to dust again when we die?”

“Yes, dear.”

“Well, mom, when I said my prayers last night, and looked under the bed, I found someone who is either coming or going.”

Out of dust we are created and to dust we shall return. And in that long in-between, between our coming and going, is the constant need to look beyond ourselves and notice who’s at the gate. It’s the least we can do for a love so divine and so overflowing.