

**Seeing and Listening**  
**Luke 16:19-31, I Tim: 6:6-19**  
**Sept. 26, 2004**

**Stop. Look. Listen. We've all heard these admonitions. And we've said, "Ok, ok., I know, I will." But do we? Don't we slow down, glance both ways, and speed ahead, in spite of the speeding train?**

**I was going to say, someone should have given the rich man of the parable this advice, before the train hit HIM. But someone did. The scriptures, the law and the prophets told him. And he didn't pay attention. He didn't stop. He didn't look. He didn't listen. He didn't stop. He kept right on buying his expensive clothes and eating his sumptuous meals. He didn't look. He didn't see the needs of Lazarus, he didn't seem to see Lazarus at all, even though Lazarus was lying there in his doorway. He didn't listen. The scriptures told him how he was to live. The law said, "love your neighbor as yourself. The prophets said, "Do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God," but if he heard these admonitions he certainly didn't heed them.**

**When the rich man dies and finds himself in misery THEN he sees Lazarus. But his self-centeredness is such that he sees him only as an errand boy. "Send him down here to bring me some water" he says to Abraham. (He seems to be still giving orders, doesn't he?) Do you see the irony here? The rich man had Lazarus at his very doorstep--he practically had to step over him every day, but he gave Lazarus nothing. Now, with a great chasm separating them he says, "Send him down to help me. Notice also, he doesn't make his request to Lazarus. (Does he still see Lazarus as not worth being addressed directly?") When Abraham refuses, the rich man's area of concerns becomes slightly broader. "Then send him back to earth to my 5 brothers." he says. "At least save my family." The rich man still doesn't get it. It doesn't even occur to him that Lazarus and people like him are also his brothers and sisters. Again Abraham refuses. "They have Moses and the prophets. If they won't listen to Moses and the prophets they won't listen even if someone rises from the dead." Of course from our vantage point we know that someone did rise from the dead and people still won't listen.**

**It's a great story, but does it apply to us? Are there people at our doorstep that we ignore, that we pass by? Are there people near us with needs -- people we don't even see because of our problems and preoccupations and pleasures?**

**I have two friends who are fast on their way to becoming bird watching experts. Recently they've taking some bird watching classes. They told me that after the classes, birds in significant numbers suddenly "appeared" around their house. Bird songs suddenly filled the air! They're learning how to look, how to listen. Our new moderator, Rick Ufford-Chase says that when he was growing up he went through two ethnic neighborhoods on his way to school every day. But he never noticed them, he never saw them. He never paid attention, he never even saw the people who lived there. "It was as if I had blinders on," he said. Are we like that?**

**Albert Schweitzer said he was moved to go as a missionary to Africa because of this parable. He said, "I saw Africa as the poor man lying on Europe's doorstep." We may not be moved to go to Africa, but consider this. Peter and John, given hope by the resurrection and transformed by the Holy Spirit, encounter a lame man at the very door of the temple. Peter said to him, we don't have silver and gold but what we have we give, and he healed him. Are there people at the very doors of this church who need our help, our healing?**

**Do we see the needs in our country? On August 26th, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that, in 2003, 35.9 million people were living in poverty (an increase of 4.3 million newly poor since 2000) . Of these 12.9 million are children. Now nearly 18 percent of children in the United States are living in poverty. 18 percent! That's almost 1 of every 5 children in this country.**

**Biblical scholar and theologian Walter Wink tells us another parable: There once was a rich nation that consumed almost half the world's resources. Landed elites in the poor nations became rich by producing cash crops for export to this nation while their own people lacked adequate nutrition. Even in that rich nation, many were hungry and homeless, unemployed and ill. Yet the rich nation ignored them, or had them arrested. Because the rich nation really was not religious, but only pretended to be, it had no fear of divine punishment. And because it was so powerful politically and militarily, it was able to protect itself against revolts abroad and revolutions at home.**

**In short, this rich nation had nothing to fear from any quarter.**

**Yet, inexplicably, it began to fall apart. The judgment it scoffed at in the future began to eat away at it like acid. In desperation its people began to arm themselves. Soon this rich land had the most heavily armed populace in the world. But still the acids continued to eat. They built walls to shut the emigrants and "inferior races" out. But still the acids continued to eat.**

**They called for the death penalty, for more prisons, for more arrests, for greater surveillance, for tougher sentencing. Their politicians got elected on platforms of resentment, fear, and greed. The people cried for the restoration of traditional values, not recognizing that these values had landed them in the soup they were now in. And still the corrosive acids continued to eat at the fabric of society.**

**It never occurred to them that salvation lay in solidarity with these poor within and outside their borders. Like the rich man in the parable, this rich nation could not understand that the gate outside which Lazarus perpetually lies is an opening, not a barrier. All he had to do is go out and connect with the poor, and seek a common destiny. All he had to do was recognize what lay before his very eyes.**

**This parable is not about an afterlife (on which we may be willing to take our chances). The poor are at our gate—now. The judgment is already ineluctably working. It is stark warning and desperate compassion: If we won't do what's right because it's right, will we at least do it out of fear?**

**One more parable:**

**Reader: Once upon a time,**

**Chorus: Once upon a time,**

**Reader: There was born a beautiful baby with a silver spoon in her mouth.**

**Chorus: A silver spoon in her mouth.**

**Reader: As she grew older she realized that she could have anything she wanted---**

**Chorus: Servants, fine clothes, jewels, cars...**

**Reader: She married a fine man who had also been born with**

a silver spoon in *his* mouth--

**Chorus:** Anything he wanted.

**Reader:** Soon children were born to them  
an they were born...

**Chorus:** Yes, we know, with silver spoons in *their* mouths.

**Reader:** Anyway, one day the Lord appeared to the woman and asked,  
“Are you having a good life?”

**Woman:** “Yes,”

**Reader:** Said the woman,

**Woman:** “Very nice.”

**Reader:** “Well,” said the Lord, “I thought I would have heard from you by  
now.”

The woman looked around to see if the Lord was talking to  
someone else and the, seeing no one, she answered,

**Woman:** “Do I know you?”

**Reader:** “Well, said the Lord, “we did meet years ago, but you seem to  
have forgotten me.”

**Chorus:** The woman looked at the Lord blankly. She had no idea where  
they had met.

**Reader:** The Lord continued: “What you have--all of your blessings, your  
material wealth as well as you family and friends, your  
beautiful life-style, the trees, the flowers, the food you eat--  
all came from me.”

**Woman:** “Oh, no!”

**Chorus:** Said the woman.

**Woman:** “I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth. You gave me  
nothing.”

**Reader:** “Nothing?” asked the Lord.

**Women:** “Nothing.”

**Chorus:** Nothing.

**Reader:** “I thought,” said the Lord, “that since you have so much you  
might be thankful and in your gratitude you might want to  
share with others.”

**Woman:** “Oh, I see. Well, if you are a beggar, you may go to the back  
door and the cook will give you a plate of food.”

**Chorus:** *If* you chop the wood!

**Reader:** I am not a beggar,” said the Lord. “I am a King.”

**Woman:** “Oh, well--kings may go in the front door.”

**Chorus:** Oh, yes, please, the front door.

**Woman:** “But, if you are a king, why are you asking for a handout?”

**Reader:** “It’s not for me,” said the king. “It’s for you sisters and brothers.”

**Woman:** “Now I know you mistake me. I have no sisters and brothers.”

**Reader:** “Oh, yes,” said the Lord. “You have a world full of them.”

**Woman:** “You mean I am to feed the world?”

**Reader:** “Feed my sheep.”

**Woman:** “But what do you mean?”

**Reader:** “You know what I mean: To whom much is given, from them much is required.”

**Chorus:** Much is required!

**Reader:** And what happened to the woman who was born with a silver spoon in her mouth?

**Chorus:** She *did* know what the Lord meant.

**Reader:** And now she takes her silver spoon and feeds her hungry brothers and sisters.

How many of you have a silver spoon?

**Chorus:** What do you mean?

**Reader:** You know what I mean.

“Silver Spoons” from Reaching For Rainbows, by Ann Weems

**Will we stop? Will we look? Will we listen?**