

One of my favorite descriptions of heaven and hell is that of a banquet feast. The participants gather around a massive table overflowing with all sorts of amazing foods. However, they only have bizarrely oversized wooden utensils with which to feed themselves. In hell, those gathered around the banquet feast writhe in hunger as they endlessly try to feed themselves but to no avail. The utensils make it impossible for each person to serve him or herself. Meanwhile, those in heaven revel at the variety and richness of the food set before them. They too use the same oversized utensils, except rather than trying to serve themselves, they serve each other.

A slight variation on this theme of feeding each other was practiced in the mountains of Montana during the various backpack excursions that I led in the early 1990's. After the initial day of a long hike, at least 5000 feet above what was normal for all the campers, and with a 50 pound backpack, you can imagine the crowd that gathered around the pots filled with what would be dinner that night. Yet, this dinner was not simply plopping grub on a plate and watching everyone scurry to a rock of their choosing to devour it. Hardly. This meal is what the director dubbed *perceiving the need*.

Basically, nothing was served in the traditional way. No one could serve him or herself. Nor could anyone ask for what they wanted, with the expectation that someone would give it to them. Rather, this first meal was an exercise in training one's eye to see—or to perceive—the need of one's fellow backpackers. It started slowly. This was not how they ate dinner in flatland North Dakota or Minnesota or Wisconsin! However, soon enough, you could hear the group pick up the rhythm of perceiving the need. "John, would you like some bread?" or, "Sue, can I get you something to drink?" or, "Catherine, would you like another helping of stew?" were the questions that filled the dinner experience on that first night in the mountains. Perceiving the need not only changed the way that people saw the world; perceiving the need changed the way they engaged the world

Interestingly, one need only look at the gospel text for this Sunday and recognize this very theme at play in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Perceiving the need and engaging the world in a different way because of what you see is at the heart of the gospel. Oh, sure, the end of the text offers a dire warning that you cannot serve God and wealth. (Though, it is always helpful to remember that Jesus addresses wealth and particularly the inequities within society many times more than he ever does sexual or other moral issues.) Yet, I think we understand that wealth, ultimately, is not the root of the problem. Rather, the nature of wealth to shield us from reality, to allow us to deny that which is in front of our very face, and to cling to what wealth can give us is that which draws us away from God. Indeed, that is the challenge that the rich man embodies. The rich man in life—and even in death to a certain extent—never sees or acknowledges Lazarus, and that is the sin.

Lazarus lies outside the gate of the rich man, and the rich man must ignore him each time that he leaves his house. In death, the rich man again denies Lazarus'

existence. He seeks intervention from Abraham, but he still fails to acknowledge Lazarus. Thus, the text is not so much a caution against possessing wealth as it is a warning to not allow wealth to so skew our perception of reality that we deny the very human life that exists before us.

The fact that this text is assigned for the Sunday that we participate in the *Miles for a Mission* Road Race is fitting. And at the same time as we are preparing to utilize our resources to support those most vulnerable in our community, we are wise to attend to the teaching of this text. While what we do is good and noble and helpful, it can also be yet another way that we deny the reality of the world around us and fail to perceive the need of those at the gate of our parish. Running is a wonderful activity, and the energy and community created with such an event is palpable. However, if this is the end of our work and the fulfillment in our mind of our responsibility to others, we are missing a very important aspect of our life together.

Namely, we are missing that fact that life is *together*. We do not make ourselves without the myriad connections that allow us to engage the life that we have been given. Those who may be less fortunate from a number of perspectives are not necessarily the only ones who have contributed to their place in life. They too are the product of myriad connections or missed connections. And we cannot deny our interconnectedness. We cannot fail to see—or to perceive—that a bit of us exists in the other and a bit of the other exists in us. The beauty of the clip of the week below underscores this so innocently and poignantly.

The term *noblesse oblige* has often been used to express that with wealth and power (the fruits of nobility) comes responsibility (obligation). The term certainly would have applied to the rich man in the gospel text, and his inability to act in kindness toward Lazarus was a judgment on him that held great consequence. Within our democratic society and the so-called meritocracy of our social structure, the term—or certainly the social realities that construct it—may seem outdated. And the degree to which we are able to move away from such a rigid and random social hierarchy is a good thing, for it invites us to see—to perceive—the value in the other regardless of class or any other social marker that we might use.

However, the term does function to remind us that, regardless of our place in society, we do have a responsibility to the other. We are invited to take action to benefit those who are not as fortunate as we may be. We are asked to perceive the need as it presents itself to us. And, most importantly, we are called to change the way that we engage the world. We see, we perceive, we act, and in so doing we not only save our life from some eternal judgment, but we save ourselves and a little bit of this world right here and right now.