



September 30, 2007

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

Luke 16: 19-31

“Lines and a Circle”

As I was growing up in the 1950’s, kids still spent most of their time playing outside. We did have TV, but just watched cartoons for a half-hour a day, while Mom was fixing dinner from 5 to 5:30. Sometimes we’d watch variety shows like Ed Sullivan, or Walt Disney programs. But I think my brother and I spent more time playing with the huge box the TV came in, than we did watching TV. It made a great house, covered wagon, etc. We played tag and hide-and-seek. We caught bugs and put them in jars. The boys played marbles, the girls played jacks.

It’s easy to idealize that time period. Life WAS less hectic then, but you know-people are people and there was plenty of evidence of our fallen, broken state, even out among the kids playing in our neighborhood.

I remember a “game” the boys used to play. It was territorial behavior, establishing the pecking order amongst them. One boy would approach another, challenging him to stand up and face him. He would then draw a line in the dirt in front of his feet, glare at the other kid, and dare him to cross the line. If he did cross the line, a fistfight broke out. The winner of the fight was above the loser in the pecking order. If the challenged boy did not cross the line, he immediately dropped far below his challenger in the pecking order. Though we girls didn’t play this exact game, we had our own more subtle, invisible, but iron-clad lines, shutting some girls out of our inner circle, and establishing a pecking order that was as rigid as the boys’.

Jesus’ parable about the rich man and Lazarus reveals these same human tendencies to draw lines in life. We draw lines, outside of which we do not consider other people as important. We do not see them as our concern. They are

not “kin”, not brothers or sisters, and therefore not relevant to God’s command to us to be our “brothers’ keeper”.

The rich man in Jesus’ story is a prime example of this attitude and behavior. He lived in luxury, but Lazarus, covered with oozing sores, lay at his gate in pain, hunger, and misery. The story doesn’t tell us that he even NOTICED the man, Lazarus. Lazarus was likely invisible to the wealthy man.

The contrasts Jesus makes in this parable are vivid. K. Elizabeth Rennie sums them up in her commentary: “In this world, the purple robes contrast with the pustulant sores; the sumptuous feasts of one vs. the slow starvation of the other. But at the moment of death, everything changes. We hear nothing about what happened to Lazarus’ mortal remains here on earth, because he is immediately ‘carried away by the angels to be with Abraham.’ The rich man, however, is simply ‘buried’. Lazarus is not only welcomed into paradise, but he is given the most desired spot— at ‘Abraham’s bosom’. This phrase suggests Lazarus has been gathered to his ancestors in the closest way imaginable. The rich man proceeds directly to ‘Hades’, where he begins to experience ‘torment’ and ‘agony’. The ‘great reversal’ has been accomplished.”

Think about this story, and the way Jesus tells it. In this parable, the rich man doesn’t even have a NAME, while the impoverished Lazarus does. (Actually, this is the one parable Jesus told in which a character has a name.) This is the opposite of how we operate. The RICH AND FAMOUS all have well-known names- the poor are nobody, invisible. But after he dies, the rich man makes a connection he did not see in this life. He has new eyes, and calls Lazarus his brother—seeing too late, that Lazarus was his brother all along.

Friends, we are a line-drawing bunch of people. Actually, all people are. In various parts of the world we have our own ways of doing it. And any people who are outside our lines are either non-existent and invisible, or members of another family, surely not ours.

This truth about myself hit me hard during the massacre of ethnic Albanians in the former Yugoslavia some years ago. The photos and films of the fleeing refugees horrified me. There were little kids in those pictures. Little blond and brown-haired kids that looked a lot like mine, wearing windbreakers just like the ones I could pick up at K-Mart. And they had nowhere safe to go, and had seen loved ones killed before their eyes. It ripped my heart out.

Then I realized something. Sadly, I had seen film and photos similar to these very often over the years. But I hadn’t been impacted in the same visceral way. Why, I

wondered, and the Holy Spirit gave me the answer immediately. Because those films and photos depicted children whose color and hair and clothing looked very different from mine. Their houses and villages looked like ones I'd never seen before. They didn't FEEL like family, because of my unconscious racist attitudes and ways of drawing lines. I didn't plan on seeing things that way; I didn't even know it was happening in me--- but it was.

In the years following the 9-11 tragedy, we have been struggling to find our balance, to look for our place in this world. Those of us who are people of faith have been awakened to a desire to put God first in our lives. We've been seeing how much our culture has led us away from putting God first. And I am glad. We need to put God first; and to recognize the illusions that our culture has used to woo us away from that truth.

But, please be clear about this. If we put God first, we will invite him to change our eyesight. We will know that we have let some people matter less to us than others. We have allowed some people to be invisible to us. We have not considered all people KIN; FAMILY, OUR BROTHERS, OUR SISTERS.

Some of you may be wondering, but how do we apply this teaching, especially in complicated world situations like the ones we face today? I am not saying that we as a nation, as a people, should not seek to protect ourselves against harm. I AM saying that when we put God first, we have to let Him lead. We have to ask for his eyesight. We have to make all our decisions seeking his wisdom and ways.

God, has made himself known to us, friends, in Jesus Christ- in what he did, in what he said, in the stories he told. This God tells us to draw circles, not lines, and to recognize that everyone is within the circle of our human family. We are to be circle drawers with Christ, recognizing our brothers and sisters for who they really are WHILE WE ARE LIVING THIS LIFE—not waiting until after we depart it, when it will be too late.

Some of you have surely heard the little saying, written by Edwin Markham in the last century: “He drew a circle to shut me out- heretic, rebel, a thing to flout- But love and I had the wit to win: we drew a circle that took him in.” This is God's way of operating, as revealed to us in Jesus, our Christ.

I have been proud of our nation and our leaders as many have exhorted us not to lash out against people of Middle-eastern or Arab backgrounds, against Moslems as a whole, or any other group of people. I have sensed God's Spirit in this and it thrills me. However, the recent visit of Mr. Ahmadinejad, the leader of Iran, and the uproar about his presence at Columbia University has elicited something that

comes close to hate. Jesus NEVER calls us to hate PEOPLE. We are to hate the evil that they do. Not the people. God calls us to hate the evil that you do and the evil that I do, and the evil that we do by leaving things undone. That's what we are to hate.

It is not easy for us to learn God's ways. It's hard to eliminate ways we are line drawers in our personal lives, our social lives, our work lives. It's even harder to stop those patterns in our national life. It is not easy. It is very complicated. But that should help us resist the temptation to make things easy. We can't just line things up along religious lines, for example, saying Christians are inside the circle- Jews, Buddhists, Moslems are outside. Those little kids fleeing Albania with their blond heads and K-Mart jackets were Moslem. The people killing their families were Christian.

The world is very complicated and we are limited in our understanding. But we can learn- we are learning, to open our eyes and look at Lazarus. We are learning to pay better attention to how we exclude people, ignore them, or see them as of less value than ourselves. We are learning. May God show us the way- in our homes, in our church, in our town, community, nation and world. And may God's ways of justice and mercy triumph.