

A judge in New York City was mugged. Later he called a press conference. He made the following statement to reporters, ***"This mugging will in no way affect my decisions in resolving matters of this kind."*** An elderly woman stood up in the back of the room and said, ***"Then mug him again!"*** She wanted to make sure the judge got the message about what is happening in the streets of our cities.

An old man was trying to lead a obstinate donkey down the road. A passer-by stopped him and commented on the way the donkey was behaving. ***"Oh, I can make him do anything I want him to do with just a kind word,"*** the owner said. "Doesn't look like it to me," the other sneered.

"Sure, I can," the owner said. Whereupon he climbed off the donkey, picked up a two-by-four beside the road, and clobbered the animal on the head. He then explained to the onlooker. ***"I simply have to get his attention."***

Lloyd Ogilvie tells of a father who knelt down to tuck his little boy into bed. It was time for prayers and hugs. The little boy began his childhood prayer which he had repeated so many times before: ***"Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take."*** On this night, however, the words got mixed up and the child carelessly spoke words of the greatest wisdom he would ever know. **He prayed: *"If I should wake before I die. . . ."*** Then he stopped in embarrassment and apologized, "Oh, Daddy, I got all mixed up." Wisely, his father responded, "Not at all, son; that is the first time that prayer was properly prayed. **My deepest longing for you is that you may wake up before you die."**

Let's talk for a few minutes about waking up before we die for, indeed, some of us are asleep in some of the most critical areas of our life.

Psychologists and physiologists call the phenomenon HABITUATION. It's a good word to add to our vocabulary. Habituation. Scientists have measured the effects of habituation in the laboratory.

For example, repeat a sharp noise every five seconds. Then measure its effect on your consciousness. The first sound will cause a sharp drop in skin resistance. The second sound will cause a smaller drop, the third still less, as the response of the skin becomes "habituated." In familiar terms, we would say, we have grown accustomed to the noise. **We are "used" to it. Habituated.**

A noisy elevated train used to run along Third Avenue in New York City. After it was torn down, "many people in the neighborhood began to call the police quite late to report something strange' occurring" -- unusual noises, suspected thieves or burglars. . . . The police determined that these calls took place at about the time the former late-night train would have passed these people's houses. ***What they were hearing' was the absence of the familiar noise of the train."***

They had grown habituated to this particular noise. Now they would have to become habituated to its absence. **Habituation. Growing so accustomed to something that we no longer even realize it is there.**

In the human being, habitual behavior walk hand in hand. Drinking coffee and smoking a cigarette often go together. It is hard to stop smoking and still drink a cup of coffee, the same goes for many who hang out at the bar...often if you drink on a regular basis you think you need to smoke.

"Once there was a rich man," said Jesus, "who dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his wounds."

Jesus was a story teller. Note the contrast between these two characters in his parable. "Rich man. . . purple. . . fine linen . . . luxury." And "beggar. . . covered with sores. . . longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. . . dogs came and licked his wounds." Jesus wanted us to see in our mind's eye, in a way that we could not forget, how fortunate the rich man was and how unfortunate Lazarus was.

Now, let me ask you a question. Do you think the rich man saw Lazarus lying there at his gate? **Of course he did.** At first. **But eventually he became habituated to Lazarus' presence.** He became used to it. Lazarus' presence and his needs made less and less of an impression on the rich man. Soon it was as if Lazarus wasn't even there. **Can that happen to people? You bet it can. It can even happen to you and me.**

YOU AND I NEED TO KNOW THAT WE ARE THE RICH MAN IN JESUS' STORY. Most of us are. We really are. We have far more in common with the rich man than we do with Lazarus. We live in fine homes. ***I can look from up here each Sunday and see people dressed in purple and fine linen.*** Maybe we would not describe our lives as filled with luxury, but they really are. There are people in other countries who would think they had died and gone to heaven if they visited a salad bar in the average restaurant in our land. Even Europeans would be flabbergasted if they knew how well we eat and how little we pay for it.

And we should not forget that many of the things we take for granted... are really at heart, luxuries. Our ancestors got along quite well without VCRs, cell phones and Velcro, televisions and telephones, air conditioning and airplanes. And the list goes on and on. **Our world is filled with luxury.**

And we have our health. Most of us. Notice that Lazarus couldn't even walk. He WAS LAID at the rich man's gate. People who have good health are among the most fortunate people on earth.

And we have people who love us. Family--friends. Most of us have a good education. For the most part we are attractive people. Certainly, the dogs do not lick our sores.

Yes, we have more in common with the rich man than with Lazarus. And thus, Jesus confronts us with the question: Who is the Lazarus at our gate? Who is it that has a legitimate claim on our attention? For this text is not about wealth and poverty. It is about sensitivity to those around us.

YOU SEE, THE WORLD IS FILLED WITH NEEDY PEOPLE. It really is. *And those needs are not always financial. People need love, they need recognition. They need an encouraging word. They need a role model. They need a relationship with Christ.* **You see people have many needs that may go unnoticed if we do not look in their direction**

There was a sad but touching movie that was nominated for an Emmy a few years back titled, **"VERNA: USO GIRL."** Terry Hershey tells about it in the book, **GO AWAY, COME CLOSER.**

In the film Sissy Spacek portrays a clumsy, tone-deaf song-and-dance girl hired by a USO troupe because no one else is available. Verna neither sings on key nor taps with the beat, but she is utterly convinced that her destiny is stardom. She is sure that when she dies thousands will attend her funeral. Their memories of her will make her immortal. Verna does not become a star, but she does make a hit with a certain GI who falls in love with her. Though Verna returns his love, she decides she cannot disrupt her career to marry him. And so the show goes on. Verna pushes herself to perform during a battle when everyone else is too scared to move. Nothing will discourage her from fulfilling her destiny. Nothing will cause her to turn back. Not her lack of talent nor even the love of her young GI. Finally, though, Verna is killed by a land-mine. An Army Public Relations Officer hears about her tragic death," the first USO girl to die in action. This Public Relations Officer decides her story might boost morale. So he gets the story out. He arranges for foreign dignitaries to attend Verna's funeral. Bands march behind her casket. Ironically, no one even knows her name. Having rejected love in pursuit of success, she dies without either. But she does have a big funeral.

In her own way, Verna was as needy as Lazarus. Her needs were psychological and emotional. We might even call them pathological, but they were just as real. Needy people are all around us. They are our neighbors, the people we work with, the people we love. **Sometimes the Lazarus in our midst is our children or our spouse. WE NEED TO OPEN OUR EYES AND LOOK AROUND US, BEFORE IT IS TOO LATE!!**

Who is the Lazarus at your gate? It may be your spouse, it may be a teenager in your family, and it could be that stranger you see each day on the side of the road as you drive to work.

Growing up is never easy. I was comforted to read that in order to "become a gentleman" in polite English society, **that Gandhi** (in his late teens) spent hours practicing the arranging of his tie and hair and taking lessons in dance and music. It's nice to know that one of the great men of history experienced the awkwardness of youth

It reminds me of some older people who were dining at a restaurant, and one said how interesting it would be if you could turn back the clock and live your life over again. "Well, you know what I would like?" said one of them. **"I'd like to be eighteen years old but to know what I know now."** At this point the waitress, who had been clearing the table, stopped and said, **"I'm eighteen. What is it you know?"**

Our young people need the benefit of our experience. And they need for us to listen to them without judging them. Then real communication can take place.

WHO IS YOUR LAZARUS? Well, you know how the story ends. **Both Lazarus and the rich man die.** Lazarus goes to heaven, but not the rich man. He goes to that special place reserved for the insensitive of this world. He's amazed how hot his new home is.

"Father Abraham," he cries out, "Have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue. . . ." But father Abraham says that is not possible. ***"Then I beg you," says the rich man, "send Lazarus to my father's house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them. . . ."***

Abraham replied, ***"They have Moses and the Prophets; Let them listen to them."***

"No, father Abraham," says the rich man, **"but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent."**

Father Abraham replied, ***"If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."*** (NIV)

Convinced about what? Caring for the needy? Living a righteous life? Having faith in Christ? Jesus does not say. Maybe it is to convince them to wake up before they die.

Maybe that's Christ's warning to us as well. *There is someone who needs our attention* "--someone in our own household or in our own neighborhood or seated next to us at work—OR RIGHT HERE IN CHURCH!

There is an ancient story about a botanist who was **studying the heather bell found in the highlands of Scotland.** While looking through his microscope at this beautiful flower, he was approached by a shepherd who asked what he was doing. Rather than trying to explain, the botanist invited the shepherd to peer through his microscope and observe for himself. When the shepherd saw the wonder of the flower, he exclaimed, **"My God, and I have been tramping on them all my life!"**

IS THAT THE 'WORD' OF WARNING WE NEED? ***Wake up! Pay attention! Look around you. You may be tramping on the HEART of someone nearby.***

Who is the Lazarus at your gate? Amen.