

In the weeks following the terrorist attacks of 9/11 fifteen years ago, many of us were starting to realize that our world was now irrevocably changed. And as the dust and ashes were just starting to settle, two images stood out for me.

The first image was from a chapel service I conducted at a high-powered Episcopal school for girls, where the students were mostly from privileged families and were looking forward to attending the finest colleges and universities in the nation. I decided to use this upper school chapel service not only as an opportunity to speak to these smart and hard-driving teenagers, but also to invite them to speak with me. So after some initial remarks, I asked the church full of 500 middle school and high school students, "How is life now different for you? How have your perspectives and priorities changed?"

The girls were eager to talk. And their remarks were powerful. As they spoke, it occurred to me that these young women had experienced something that would have been unimaginable when I was their age, and that their lives had changed in equally unfathomable ways.

- A couple of students said that little things that used to annoy them and make her grumpy just didn't bother her anymore; they found themselves focusing on more important things. One girls said the city's traffic and its rude drivers no longer got to her.
- A common response was that the experience of 9/11 had brought people together. "We're definitely closer as a community," one student said.
- But several students nodded enthusiastically and echoed the student who said, "This event has taught me how important it is not to wait until tomorrow to tell someone how much you love them."

Like many of us in the weeks following 9/11, these students had been moved most of all by hearing the voicemail recordings of husbands and wives, parents and children, who realized that the building they were in was about to fall, or the plane they were on was about to crash, so they used their last moments of life to call a husband or wife, a son or daughter, a mother or father,...and simply say to that person, "I love you. I've always loved you. And I am so sorry we argued the other day. Please forgive me, and remember that I will always be with you."

In the words of this morning's parable of the rich man and Lazarus, we all from time to time create chasms in our relationships, and over time, they can start to seem un-crossable. We can no longer get to each other.

Interestingly, in the aftermath of 9/11, none of the students in this elite Episcopal school said that they were now more determined than ever to score high on their SAT so that they could get into Stanford or UVA and then make as much money as they possibly could. No, these young people, felt as if something had changed, and they were determined to live differently.

This morning's parable gives us language for it. It was as if we had been feasting sumptuously on things that no longer mattered, and we were now turning our attention to the neglected things that really did matter. We were starting to notice our need for each other, for our family and friends, and

our need for a sense of deeper connection with neighbors and strangers – no one is unnecessary. In other words, in the aftermath of 9/11, we were starting to notice Lazarus lying at our gate. What used to matter no longer did. And what we used to neglect we were now determined to embrace.

The second image that stands out for me from that time fifteen years ago, had the same effect. It was a front-page apology by the New York Times about the inclusion of a glossy Men’s Fashion section in the paper. This section had been printed before the attacks, and the apology simply acknowledged that this Men’s Fashion section now seemed “inconsistent with the gravity of the news.”

And inside this fashion section, there was one image after another of pouty-lipped studs with smirks on their faces, modeling \$1,500 suits and accessories, while excessively thin young women reclined languorously around them in their own luxury. And punctuating this special section were designer dogs resting comfortably on antique oriental rugs.

We probably would not have paid any attention to this kind of silliness in the days prior to 9/11, but now now our sense of the beautiful had changed: our new sense of the beautiful was in pictures of men and women of all sizes who were clad in bulky, fire-resistant coats, wearing fireman’s helmets or caps with NYPD on the front, and all of them digging furiously through rubble, trying to find what was lost, and everything was covered in soot. Or people whose faces were smudged with ashes and streaked with tears embracing each other in such a way that made it clear, we were all now changed.

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Little things that used to annoy us became irrelevant. Sumptuous things that used to tempt us now seemed silly. And churches were suddenly full again. 9/11 did not prompt anyone to say, “Now I’m more determined than ever to become rich and famous.” Now we wanted to embrace what we had neglected.

Because our priorities had changed. Suddenly, we could see Lazarus lying at our gate – those people and situations in our lives that we had that we had been neglecting, that were starting to waste away, those important parts of our life and our world that were waiting for our long-overdue embrace.

One way of thinking about the parable of the rich man and Lazarus is that it is an important and even urgent invitation for us to ask ourselves some urgent questions. Communities like Charlotte, Tulsa, Ferguson, Baltimore...all of these communities are now asking, “What have we been neglecting? Who has been suffering at our gates? What chasms have we been creating in our communities?” It’s a communal question, but it is also a very personal one.

As individuals, as a church community, as a city and as a nation, we are invited to ask, “What has received too much of our time and attention, what parts of our lives have we been clothing in purple and fine linen, and feeding sumptuously every day, perhaps without even thinking about it? And who or what have we have been neglecting at our gate, who or what is wasting away, covered in sores and longing for at least the smallest bit of attention?”

These are urgent questions. Because ultimately it is up to us to decide, are our lives going to create un-crossable chasms? Or, are our lives going to forge unbreakable bonds? The parable of the rich man and Lazarus seems to say, the decision is up to us and the choices we make now.