

IT'S A SIGN!

Sermon for Pentecost 19—Lk 16:19-31

LPC, 9/29/13

I may have told this story before. Forgive me if you've heard it. Partly through my own discernment process for ordination I became discouraged with all the tasks to complete, hoops to jump through, and the inevitable waiting and waiting and waiting. I wondered whether I really had a call to ordination, and even if I did, was it worth the effort and the emotional roller-coaster. I prayed to God for a sign.

I was driving home from work one day in a particularly dark mood when I saw it. Sometimes you see this kind of thing around here, particularly at the corner of Bethany Pike and GC&P. Couples getting married or people having big parties sometimes put hand-made signs at intersections to direct their guests to the reception site. It was one these I saw on the day in question. It said, "Keep going. You're almost there."

I had to laugh. Sure, I had prayed for a sign, but I didn't really expect a literal sign, marked on poster-board and wired to a sign-post. I probably expected it to come clearly and directly from God, and not from Mike and Evie or whoever it was that was getting married!

I suppose it is human nature to seek signs from God. The perceived dearth of signs makes it hard for many people to believe, or to step out in faith.

Even where there's proof, people disbelieve. My grandfather didn't believe that men had landed on the moon. The film of Neil Armstrong bouncing around in low gravity didn't convince him. "They was puppets," he maintained. People want signs, but even when they're there, they still disbelieve.

At first glance, this story from Luke about the Rich Man and Lazarus is about the failure of the rich to care for the poor, and the punishment that awaits such sins of omission. But looking closer, there is something here about the human obsession with signs from God.

The Rich Man in this story dies and goes to Hades, apparently because in life he ignored his Jewish responsibility to care for the poor and needy out of his plenty. Tormented by flames, he begs to Abraham, who is far away (presumably in heaven) for relief. It is interesting that under these circumstances he recognizes Lazarus, whereas in life he ignored Lazarus, even though Lazarus lay at his very gate.

When Abraham refuses the Rich Man's request, the latter begs that a message be conveyed by Lazarus to his five brothers about what awaits if they too ignore the poor. Abraham protests that the law and the prophets have already conveyed that message. The Rich Man proposes that whereas his family was not impressed by Scripture they will surely respond to a visit from someone beyond the grave.

The Very Rev. Cynthia Byers Walter

You would think that, wouldn't you? If you got a visit from someone you knew to be dead, you'd be impressed, right? That's what happened to Ebenezer Scrooge in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. Visited by the ghost of Jacob Marley and a trio of Christmas spirits, Scrooge amended his life and became a good person.

But Abraham doesn't like the idea. "He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"

Abraham's words are, of course, prophetic in themselves. Jesus will rise from the dead and despite this stupendous event, many will not be convinced to seek and follow God.

People want signs, but even when they get them, they don't believe. They don't amend their lives. They don't follow God.

One of the points of this story is that *the signs are there!* Signs have been there all along in scripture. If scriptural testimony were not enough, God's own Son showed up on earth as a human being, lived, taught, healed, died and rose again. The signs are there.

Human beings have an absolute genius for ignoring signs.

Last weekend at Convention, Rich and I arrived separately at a Taizé service of evening prayer. I arrived first and saved him a seat. When he entered the room I waved and waved to get his attention and he looked right past me. I didn't want to shout in that quiet setting but I found myself wondering, "What do I have to do to get his attention?"

God must wonder the same thing. God gave us life, God gave us covenant, God gave us the law and the prophets, God gave us scripture, God gave us God's own Son and *raised him from the dead*. What does God have to do to get our attention?

In this instance of the Rich Man and Lazarus, what God specifically wants our attention for is our responsibility to care for each other.

The signs are there. We can choose to recognize the signs of God, or we can refuse to recognize the signs of God. Fortunately, God is patient.