

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time, 2019
St. Mary's Catholic Church
Fr. Michael A. Renninger

Her name was Anna. She had a long Italian last name - like "Barbilinardo," or something like that. I just called her "Anna."

Anna was one of the ladies who worked at the residence where I lived when I was a monk and taught at a high school in South Philadelphia. There were 19 priests and seminarians living in the house. We were busy running the school and doing our ministries, so we hired three ladies to help with cooking and cleaning.

Anna arrived at 6:00 AM each day. I'd see her carrying laundry or helping with breakfast and I'd say, "Good morning Anna." That was it. Some afternoons, she might be making homemade gnocchi in the kitchen. Again I simply say, "Hello Anna."

When I look back, I have to admit that that was a very busy year for me. I was teaching four sections of freshman religion at an all-boys school. 45 boys per class! That's a lot of quizzes and essays to correct. I was a busy man. Maybe that's why I never even learned Anna's last name properly. To be honest, I hardly noticed her.

Until... until the day she wasn't there.

It was a Tuesday. I liked Tuesdays. Guess what we had for breakfast on Tuesdays? Scrapple! So that Tuesday, I walked downstairs, went to the kitchen and... nothing. Anna wasn't there. No breakfast was prepared. I grumbled.

"Where's Anna?" I asked, in a foul mood.

One of the other seminarians said, "Her son died."

(I didn't know she had a son.)

So I asked, "How old was he?"

"35," someone else said. "Didn't you know how sick he was?"

(I kept my mouth shut, not wanting to reveal my ignorance.)

It turns out that Anna's oldest son had been living with HIV for the past four years. He had no insurance. Her husband was in a memory care unit. In order to pay the medical bills, she worked at a local diner during the night, and worked at our residence during the day.

One of the priests said, "She worked almost 17 hours every day. That's why she always

looked so tired.”

(I hadn't noticed that she looked tired.)

Someone else said, “Her son's illness broke her heart. That's why she cried so often in the kitchen.

(I hadn't noticed that she cried in the kitchen).

The priest next to me said, “She put the funeral information next to his photo in the kitchen.”

(I hadn't noticed any picture in the kitchen. Nor the rosary that sat next to it. Nor the fact that she prayed that rosary for her ill son during her break. I hadn't noticed *anything*.)

Everyone else in the house had taken the time to *notice* Anna – not just as the employee who made us scrapple. They had taken time, they had been willing, to notice that she was a human being. They noticed a human being who was hurting.

I hadn't noticed.

When Jesus tells the story of the Rich Man and Poor Lazarus, he is teaching us life-changing truth. But let's be clear: This is *not* a parable in which Jesus tells poor people that they should be happy with their lot, because they are all guaranteed to go to heaven. Sadly, some preachers have misused this text to tell the poor that God wants them to *stay* poor, so that they can go to heaven later. That's not the message of Jesus.

And in this parable, Jesus isn't saying that every rich person is going to hell. If that were the case, we should all start packing for our meeting with Satan. Why? Because, compared to almost every human being who has ever lived on this planet, *we* are the rich.

In another place, Jesus says it's 'difficult' for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. But Jesus also meets a rich man who gives to the poor, and to him he announces that “today, salvation has come to this house.” (Luke 19:9)

So, in this parable, why does the Rich Man end up in the netherworld? Is it because he's an arrogant person who feels entitled to have other people serve him? Perhaps.

Did you notice how the rich guy immediately starts giving orders to Abraham and Lazarus? “Lazarus, bring me some water! Lazarus, deliver a message to my family! Abraham, this is how you should run heaven!”

Apparently, the Rich Man is accustomed to having other people do things for him, when he wants them done. Thank God none of US would ever fall into that trap! Thank God we would never teach our CHILDREN that kind of attitude!

Is Jesus saying that arrogant, entitled folks don't get to heaven? Maybe. But maybe there's another message. Maybe the Rich Man's sin wasn't his money. *Maybe his sin was that he just didn't notice.*

Jesus tells us that Lazarus, the poor man, was lying at the rich man's door, covered in sores. He must have been there most days, because Lazarus knew what the rich man was eating, and he longed to eat the scraps that fell from the table. Dogs came to lick his sores.

Jesus includes an important detail: the poor man was at the rich man's *door*. If Lazarus was at the door, the rich man had to walk by him (or over him!) every day. He walked by the poor suffering man every day and didn't notice.

Is that humanly possible? Yes. Because *I walked by Anna every day* when I taught at that school. She wasn't at the door. She was in the kitchen and down the hall. Carrying my laundry and frying my scrapple. I didn't notice. *That* was my sin. The Rich Man didn't notice the poor man at his door. What this his sin?

Young preachers like to pass judgment on the Rich Man. Older preachers, who are honest about their humanity, may be more nuanced. We like to tell ourselves that we would *certainly* notice a poor guy at our door, especially if the neighborhood dogs were licking his bleeding skin. We might get mad at the poor guy for his vagrancy, we might call the police to have him removed, but by golly we would notice!

But ... *do we notice?* Do we SEE the burdens that our neighbors are carrying? Do we even WANT to see what other people are dealing with? If I start to notice, will I get overwhelmed? There are so many people who need so much help. Do I walk by, focused on 'how busy and important I am,' so that I don't actually see the hurting human in the hallway? Maybe I make that choice.

But if I have a choice, let me say this – *I don't want to go to hell!* So maybe I need to *start noticing!* I need to start noticing the burdens that my sisters and brothers in Christ are carrying.

God notices your suffering, and mine. So I need to start noticing:

- + what it must be like to live with poverty in an economy that has created so much wealth
- + what it must be like to be living without shelter or running water in the Bahamas, weeks after the hurricane
- + what it must be like to live as an immigrant –legal or illegal – in this country.
- + what it must be like to be a woman who lives in the daily fear that her husband will physically abuse her, or her children
- + what it must be like to be an adult who lives with the terrible effects of clergy sexual abuse
- + what it must be like to be homeless in Richmond
- + what it must be like to be a woman named Anna, whose tired eyes could have revealed

the burden she was carrying, if a young seminarian would take the time to notice

I can't tell you exactly what Jesus wants you to do in the coming week, or the coming month. But I do know this. There is someone in your life whose heart is breaking and life needs mending. Will you let yourself notice?

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