

Who is Missing?

Homily for September 28, 2025

Leaving an empty chair at the dining table is a tradition with various meanings, such as honoring ancestors, remembering fallen military members, commemorating absent or deceased loved ones and symbolizing hope for the return of those in captivity or facing hardship. This gesture can signify grief, hope for a reunion or a gesture of hospitality to unexpected guests.

I first learned about leaving an empty chair at the dining table with our Jewish brothers and sisters during their Passover Seder. In the Passover Seder, an empty chair or even a whole place setting is reserved for Elijah the Prophet, symbolizing hope for the coming of the Messiah and the world's redemption. It touched me when I heard about it and made me think about who is missing at the dining table every time I am having a meal. The tradition was transformed into a Christian custom, possibly stemming from the story of the Holy Family searching for shelter and being turned away by inns, serving as a reminder to be open to unexpected guests.

Today's Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus reminds us of how blessed we are and how we should share those blessings with others. The sin of the rich man in today's Gospel was not that he ordered Lazarus removed from his property. His sin was that he ignored Lazarus; he accepted without question that Lazarus was poor and he was rich. It wasn't a sin of commission, meaning doing something he shouldn't have done. His sin was one of omission, meaning failing to do what he should have done. We commit this same sin over and over today when we neglect the needy in our society. It's this sin that is beginning to cause grave concern, not only because of its impact on the poor but also on society as a whole.

When Pope John Paul II visited the United States in 1979, his homily focused on the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. He said, "We cannot stand idly by enjoying our own riches and freedom, if in any place, the Lazarus of the 20th century stands at our doors. In the light of the parable of Christ, riches and freedom mean a special responsibility. Riches and freedom create a special obligation."

He continued to say: "And so, in the name of the solidarity that binds us together in a common humanity, I again proclaim the dignity of every human person. The rich man and Lazarus are both human beings, both equally created in the image and likeness of God, both equally redeemed by Christ at a great cost, the price of Christ's precious blood. The poor of the United States and the world are your brothers and sisters in Christ. You must never be satisfied with giving them only the crumbs from your feast. You should share from your resources, not just your excess, to help them. And you should treat them as guests at your family table."

Let us be transformed by the Christ we receive in the Holy Communion, and see Him in everyone we encounter, as Mother Teresa said: "If I weren't able to discover Jesus hidden under the disguise of bread, I wouldn't be able to find Him in the distressing disguise of the poor."