

Too Great a Chasm
Luke 16.19-31
September 25, 2016
Pentecost +19C
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church
Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott

It's easy to caricature this parable: rich folks go to hell, poor folks go to heaven. All money is bad, all people with money are greedy, and so on. And you know as well as I do that just as we make those sweeping statements and broad generalizations, we stop listening. And then we dismiss the words of Jesus as being unrealistic or hyperbolic, at which point we're not hearing Jesus any better than most of the Pharisees were that day.

Every time we talk about those faith leaders, I feel it necessary to remind us all that we also can't make sweeping statements and broad generalizations about that specific audience. These are devout people of faith, not at all unlike us, who are protecting their tradition as it has been taught to them. Unfortunately, poor scriptural interpretation has justified a culture of superiority in which the practitioners of faith are in God's favor while everyone else is out of God's favor. They hold to a prosperity gospel that teaches God's favor = financial blessing = amassing and protecting wealth. And the opposite equation has them believing poverty and suffering are signs of God's cursing and absence. Their theology went so far as to separate them from people in need because they did not want to associate with people who had somehow lost God's hand of protection.

Jesus is teaching into that misguided and incomplete biblical theology as he tells this parable of the rich man and Lazarus. The story itself was a common one with possible Egyptian roots. There are at least seven similar ones attributed to other rabbis, and Jesus is offering his take on a common trope to highlight how far the Pharisees are from a right understanding of God's commands for mercy, compassion, and justice throughout scripture. He knew that the Pharisees used select scriptures to fiercely guard their wealth and comfort while scoffing at Jesus' ease and closeness to those they labeled as outsiders. And so Jesus tells this story to make clear, in Fred Craddock's words, "wherever some eat and others do not eat, there the kingdom of God does not exist, quote whatever Scripture you will."¹

¹ Fred Craddock, *Interpretation: Luke*, p. 197; see also pp. 195-196 for common use of this parable style

With all of that in mind, the Gospel reading this morning takes us to the bosom of Abraham. Well, technically Luke's telling has angels carrying Lazarus to the bosom of Abraham after a life of isolation, neglect, and suffering. The rich man who overlooked Lazarus in their living days now looks longingly from a place of torment onto a scene of intimacy and comfort as Lazarus is cared for at last. The rich man wants some of that comfort, too, and calls out to Abraham for help, but it is too late for him. The chasm between them is fixed. Immediately, the unnamed man thinks of his family, still living, and wants to make sure word gets to them before they're drawn to his bosom instead of Abraham's.

Knowing what we do about parables, we understand we are to read ourselves into it somehow—given our position of privilege in the United States, we quickly ask: are we the man tormented in the flame? We assume some judgment is being thrown our way here, and maybe we deflect that judgment to the long-ago Pharisee audience. But rather than asking the obvious questions about our love of money and the evil such love produces, perhaps the better questions have to do with understanding the life God has called us to live and how different that ideal is from the life we are actually living.

Professor Barbara Rossing suggests we read this tale as apocalypse. By adjusting our reading lens, she writes, "Luke is situating the audience not so much in the role of either Lazarus or the rich man, but in the role of the five siblings who are still alive. (The Greek word *adelphoi* can also be translated 'siblings'-- it includes sisters as well as brothers.) The five siblings who are still alive have time to open their eyes. They have time to see the poor people at their gates, before the chasm becomes permanent."²

I read and re-read Rossing's words against the apocalyptic parable from the comfort of my office, feet propped on the edge of my desk. And I knew studying and proclaiming this word required getting very honest with myself as we together read ourselves into the *adelphoi* of this tale. Let me tell you my story. And if I get it anything like right, as Buechner says, then in it you will hear your own. The truth is: there is much I am overlooking, passing by every day, willing myself to un-see because my comfort is great and the chasm is wide. When I say comfort, I don't mean the Isaiah 40 "Comfort, comfort my people." I mean the ease and protection and convenience of my life.

It seems every time I retreat back into the coziness of a nice life flow, the Gospel starts reminding me that I'm living a lush life behind the gate. Luke pokes me in the ribs and

² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2983

lambasts my luxury of overlooking and passing by, picking and choosing when I get involved and when I care. Or the dear Greg Jarrell, a seminary friend and ministry colleague living (and currently protesting) in Charlotte, North Carolina, reminds me of what it means to live on “Jesus’ side of the tracks,” and I realize again how wide the chasm has become between my precious comfort and a world on fire.³

Friends, the only way through the lesson of this parable is honesty. And so I simply must tell the truth: in my life, I spend more time focused on scarcity than abundance. There’s a great calculator online at GlobalRichList.com, and it allows you to determine your position in the world’s wealth. My husband and I have very average nonprofit salaries according to American standards, but globally we are in the top .07% of the world’s earners. If I just enter my own income, I am in the top .13%. That means I earn more annually than 99.87% of all people in the world. Even though I know those statistics, I waste time and energy comparing myself to those who live around the church, those whose homes I pass coming to and from my rental house every day, those whose lives I glimpse on social media. It’s shameful and embarrassing to admit before you that, more often than not, I squander hours comparing myself to the top .06% of the world’s earners instead of looking on my beautiful life with unceasing gratitude.

Nathan and I are in the midst of cleaning out closets, giving away clothes we no longer wear and books we no longer read. We have extra everything. All of our needs are met as well as most of our wants. And yet weekly I have to talk myself down from feeling embarrassed that we don’t own an enviable, historic home to hold all of the stuff that we don’t really need and the extra stuff that we store but don’t really want. All this emphasis on stuff and lack and comparison builds up until, eventually, I altogether ignore the real world—both its beauty and its need. I forget what Craddock says about the Kingdom of God existing where all are fed and cared for, not just me and mine. I don’t see. I flat out forget there’s a chasm between my life and God’s kingdom. When I am driven to distraction with thoughts of my own provision, I am separating myself from God’s presence and work in this world.

And while I am confessing, I must also confess that beyond a simple retweet or two, I spent more time this week talking about the supplies we will order for the church pantry and storeroom than I did the lives of Terence Crutcher or Keith Lamont Scott. Sure, I can point to Aleppo on a map, but I haven’t made the first step toward welcoming a refugee to this city or this church or my home. The parable is telling us

³ <https://baptistnews.com/article/standing-as-loving-accomplices-on-a-front-porch-surrounded-by-police/#.V-Rm-VeHq-l>

that our words aren't enough. The actions of our lives push us farther or draw us closer to the bosom of Abraham and the heart of God. In the hearing and the reading of this word, we are invited to see the chasm before us and do something about it.

Karoline Lewis invites us to: "Notice...the note on which the parable ends. We are reminded once again that seeing the un-seeable, caring for the disenfranchised, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, setting the oppressed free are not only marks of discipleship or acts that contribute to the reality of the Kingdom of God in our midst (Psalm 146). They are moments of resurrection. They bring the dead to life."⁴

We are figuring this out together here, these moments of resurrection. We are growing together in releasing the illusion of comfort and the addiction of self-protection. I admit my own illusions before you here because we still have a chance to get this right. Long shot as it seems, maybe it's not too late for you and me—the *adelphoi* hearing the words from this thousands-year-old story. Maybe together we can hear the words of Moses and the prophets and the voices calling to us from the life beyond. Maybe we can use our wild and precious lives for something other than our own ease. Maybe we can see and hear the world both as it is and as it should be and then busy ourselves bringing about the Kingdom of God. Maybe, just maybe, the chasm isn't fixed quite yet.

⁴ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4712>