

Bridging the Chasm
Luke 16:19-31
Rev. Stephanie Ryder
September 25, 2016

‘There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side.* He called out, “Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.” But Abraham said, “Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.” He said, “Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house— for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.” Abraham replied, “They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.” He said, “No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.” 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.” ’*

Last week a lot of people said that they thought the passage was very confusing, the parable about the dishonest manager being praised by his former employer and Jesus telling us to use dishonest wealth to gain friends. I wanted to let you know that you are not alone. Many commentators say that the passage read last week is the most confusing passage in the Bible, and even St. Augustine in the 4th century exclaimed that he couldn’t believe that Jesus actually said those things. So, you’re right on track.

This week’s passage seems just the opposite. It’s straightforward, and probably, we’re all thinking we’d prefer to go back to the confusing passage than the one read today about the rich man and Lazarus. It is a parable of judgment and perhaps hits too close to home. The two parables follow one another in the gospel of Luke. So it makes me wonder if perhaps the people listening to Jesus, the disciples and Pharisees, didn’t understand the parable about the dishonest manager either and so Jesus told this one to explain it more clearly. Maybe there’s a parallel, a link between the two passages.

In our Compassionate Kids group on Wednesday, there was a picture that the children were shown before hearing the story of the rich man and Lazarus, and they were asked what they saw. One saw the dog, another the ring on the man’s hand, another a goblet full of red liquid. Then someone said, “I see a rich man on that side

of the page and a poor man on the other side of the page.” Hmm, I thought, marveling at how brilliant they are -- yep, that’s it; you got it!

In today’s passage, an unnamed rich man is dressed in fine purple linen and dines sumptuously in his estate. At his gate lays a poor man named Lazarus, who is covered with sores that the dogs lick. (This is a different Lazarus than the friend of Jesus who was the brother of Mary and Martha.) Right from the start, and in perfect gospel style, Jesus is turning things upside down, tipping things over and making our heads have to rearrange what we know as normal and the status quo. Because the rich man is not named, and the poor man is.

Isn’t it the names of the rich and powerful that we know and remember? I bet we could all rattle off 10 names of rich and powerful people right now. And yet, we don’t know the names of the poor. They are thought of more as a group of “them” and “those people” and we pass them by, avoiding them, preferring to keep them nameless so they don’t take up too much space in our minds or trouble our hearts.

Lazarus dies and is taken by the angels to be with Abraham, and the rich man dies and is tormented by the flames in Hades. He calls out in agony to Abraham to have mercy and send Lazarus to come and serve him some cool water. The rich man doesn’t address Lazarus directly. He sees him as someone to whom he is still superior, someone to be used, someone to serve him. Abraham doesn’t allow this. Oh, you already received the good things of comfort in your lifetime, Abraham replies, while Lazarus didn’t, and now the tables are turned. And, sorry, there’s a big gulf here between us that can’t be crossed.

The rich man, who hasn’t shown any compassion yet in the parable, edges towards concern for others when he begs Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his five brothers, so they have a chance to avoid ending up like him. He still doesn’t see it, though – Lazarus is not his servant, someone he can order around to do his bidding. He doesn’t see that Lazarus is finally in a place of comfort, just leave him alone like you used to back in the day! Abraham replies that the brothers have Moses and the prophets to warn them, and the rich man says they need someone from the dead to go to them, and that will surely knock some sense into them.

Mmmm, nooo, Abraham says. If they’ve ignored Moses and the prophets, they’re not going to be convinced by someone rising from the dead. This is Jesus, telling the parable, speaking for Abraham. But isn’t it interesting the foreshadowing – they’re not going to be convinced by someone rising from the dead. Some people are going to keep going about their business, even when miracle after miracle are set before them, refusing to see, refusing to turn to a new way of thinking and acting. Some people prefer to stay in their comfort zones, ignoring and denying the plight of others.

I’ve done my banking with Wells Fargo for nearly 30 years. The situation that was brought to light earlier this week is quite unsettling. 2 million false bank and credit card accounts were created without customer consent. Senior management ignored

the practice presumably because it helped turn profits, pad sales numbers, and increase the bottom line. Thousands of Wells Fargo customers nationwide paid overdraft and late fees on accounts they never knew they had.

The bank has refunded some of the money to customers, but the bank's lowest paid workers, who were allegedly coached on how to create the fake accounts, are the ones who have borne the brunt of the punishment, with 5,300 losing their jobs, while the executive overseeing the department where the problems occurred retired with a compensation package worth tens of millions of dollars and eligibility for additional compensation, and the CEO is reported to have earned 19 million. We know his name; he is rich and powerful. We don't know the names of the 5,300 who lost their jobs.

Though I denounce the actions of Wells Fargo, I am not absolving myself of blame in this issue of the nameless remaining nameless. I shared with you some years ago about a situation just literally outside my own gate, when I went out onto the bike path in unusual custom by holding a sandwich, and was met by what I thought was a neighbor approaching me with a baby carriage. Hi, how are you? I called out as the gate closed behind me, and saw as he approached that in the baby carriage was a dog and a number of plastic bags filled with rags and trash. We're actually really hungry, said the man, do you have any food? And I glanced away from the stranger, holding my sandwich, that I had not yet started eating, and said no, I'm sorry, and walked right on by.

When I saw what I thought was a neighbor was actually a stranger, I dehumanized him and a wall went up within myself and a chasm was instantly created between us. I wanted to talk to him when he was someone who lived nearby, someone I could relate to, but when I caught a glimpse of his need, my instinct was to look away. Fortunately, as you know, I caught myself, and I turned back around and gave the man my sandwich. But not without some resentment. And it was a quick transaction -- I gave him the sandwich and he took it, and I said something like, I'm sorry, I don't know what I was thinking, here you go. I never asked for his name. And I have not seen him since.

More recently, I gave a bag of toiletries and food items that we assembled in Bible study to a mother and daughter sitting outside of CVS with a sign asking for help. I did talk with them, found out they were from Italy, and I showed them the list of community resources offered here in Marin that we had also placed in the bag. It was a nice exchange. I connected with them. But I saw them again, weeks later, as I drove out of the parking lot, and I took a different exit to avoid passing them. I was annoyed. Hasn't their situation improved yet? I gave them the list! Why are they still out here with the sign? I was grateful for the option of another exit so I didn't have to pass them. I had forgotten their names.

One of the reasons that poverty is so difficult to confront is because it forces us to look into the eyes of people who are not as different from us as we would like to

believe, and hear their stories, and walk with them in their struggles and see, really see, the pain living in their eyes. Who are the most compassionate ones in the passage today? The dogs. The dogs see Lazarus and know he is hurting and offer him comfort by licking his wounds. We can presume that they will be in the bosom of Abraham with Lazarus after they die -- because they didn't pass him by.

It is said, "It is not just what we do, but what we don't do, to which we will be held accountable," as the rich man discovers. Martin Luther King, when preaching about this text, says that the rich man went to hell not because he was rich but because he allowed Lazarus to become invisible; he failed to use his wealth to bridge the gulf that separated him from his brother Lazarus. In fact, he didn't even realize that Lazarus was his brother. Unlike the dishonest manager in last week's text, who used his resources to reduce the debts of his employer's debtors, the rich man in today's text does nothing. As one of the Compassionate Kids said: the rich man isn't mean, it's just that he ignores Lazarus.

The parable is a cautionary tale of the consequences of how we treat our neighbors who are poor. There is Good News in the text for the poor -- they will find comfort. They will find justice, because God is merciful. And that is reassuring. That doesn't mean, though, that we can resign the poor and suffering to finally receiving their comfort and wellbeing in the afterlife. The text gives us the opportunity, by aligning ourselves not necessarily with the rich man or with Lazarus, but with the brothers, who still have a chance to make things right, to see, to practice compassion rather than self-serving, to stand up or sit down or take a knee or whatever it takes to align ourselves with the invisible among us. Lazarus never says a word in this passage. It is the brothers of the rich man, it is us, who must give voice to those who are unheard, and acknowledgement to those who are unseen.

A youth group in Washington, D.C. had an evening program where homeless and formerly homeless men came to share their stories. One youth asked what is the best thing to do when someone on the street is asking for money. The homeless man replied, "Do what you feel like doing. If you give money, be aware that it may be used for food, but just as well may be used for something else. Follow your gut. Say yes, or say no, but treat me like a person. We spend our whole day not being seen. Please don't act like we aren't there."

Our church recently decided to offer financial support to the Seafarer's Ministry of the Golden Gate, an organization that responds to the spiritual, emotional, and physical needs of seafarers and port workers in San Francisco Bay. The seafarers, many from third world countries, work on the ships that transport the goods that are stocked on our grocery store aisles and that we use daily. They are away from home for many months at a time and may go several months without setting foot on land. Since 9/11, it is now difficult, if not impossible, for most mariners to leave their ships while in the US. The pay is very low, and many times the shipping companies refuse to pay the seafarers at all. The seafarers are crucial to the world economy but are forgotten group that is rarely seen or acknowledged. I appreciate

the church's support of this vital program, which seeks to recognize the invisible. We are also hoping to plan an event where we go to the Port of Oakland to meet the seafarers in person, and learn their names.

People in dire need, though they are often far away, in places we may never see or visit but only read about in the headlines, are also right outside our gate, or inside our Golden Gate. The passage today implores us to use our resources to help, and our hearts to see and hear. This is Good News for us. Because when we choose to ignore our sisters and brothers who are suffering, the chasm between us is deepened and widened, and we are cut off from one another, from the richness and diversity of humanity, and we are cut off from God. But when we make a connection with those in need around us, we are bridging the divide, bridging the chasm, as Jesus did, and as the dishonest manager in last week's parable did.

The Good News is that we are invited to live into more fuller, more meaningful, and more joyous life by sharing the gifts we have been given – our time, talents, and treasures – with those around us. For as we do, we live into the life God outlines in the law of Moses, clarifies in the prophets, and makes manifest and available to all in the life, death and resurrection of our Lord. Thanks be to God.