

“Chasms”
Luke 16:19-31
5th Sunday in Lent

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Westminster, Greenville
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I’ve been doing some thinking recently about CHASMS...
about the space that exists between us and them,
between me and someone else.

Can you think of any chasms in our country right now?
Or in your life at this moment?

If you’re on one side of an issue, and you know that a neighbor or friend or a family member is on another side of the issue, do you find that the relationship is stronger than the issue, and you have the freedom to talk about it with them?

Or do you avoid the issue...because you fear the CHASM is too vast to cross?

There was an essay in *The New York Times* recently that began like this:

“I miss my friends. We lost one another somewhere along the way, through the pandemic and politics of the last few years...boys who had known one another since Little League, [cub scouts], and caught ...walleyes together on Storm Lake in Iowa.

This caught my attention. My father grew up 45 minutes from Storm Lake in Iowa.

“Northwest Iowa is a frozen slice of Texas, one of the most conservative places in the country.”

“We gathered around a pool table a couple of times a week for many years...[arguments were over Iowa Hawkeyes v Iowa State Cyclones...but now] we’ve been programmed by nonstop propaganda...[political] campaigns and the wedge issues they drill home.

“You would think [my friends and I] could see around our differences. We can’t...One of my old friends, or shall I say acquaintances, recently said on Facebook that I lacked integrity after I posted an editorial from our newspaper...that barb stuck.

“Instead of trying to hash things out, I just quit trying.”

“You make new friends but they don’t...replace the ones you lost right here in your hometown.”¹

Do you know anything about chasms?

It’s not a new problem.

It’s an old problem.

And one day, Jesus told a parable about this very problem.

There once was a rich man, Jesus said, “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...”

It’s a chasm.

Even though the geographical distance between the rich man and Lazarus is like this...the emotional distance,

¹ Art Cullen, “We Were Friends for Years. Trump Tore Us Apart.” *The New York Times*, February 4, 2024.

the economic distance,
the spiritual distance...is like THIS.

And after they die, what happens?
Their circumstances are switched.

Now it's the rich man who's in AGONY.
Now it's Lazarus who is comforted.

And when the rich man asks Father Abraham for help, what does Abraham say?

“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....”

I mean, whew.

Why in the world would Jesus tell a parable like THIS?

I don't know about you, but I would much rather hear a parable like the ones Jesus told just one chapter earlier.

In chapter 15 of Luke's Gospel, Jesus tells a story about a shepherd who will cross any chasm to find his lost sheep. A woman who will turn over every room in the house to find a lost coin. A father who comes running out to greet the prodigal son, and extends a hand of grace to his bitter, stubborn older son.

How many of you would rather hear about a God who behaves like that?

It sounds like Jesus woke up on the wrong side of the bed today.
Where is the goodness of God in today's parable?

Where is the grace?

We'll get to those questions in a moment.

But first, an easier question: how many of you believe that Jesus loves you?

Good, good.

So if he told us this parable, he must have told it out of love...

I was picking up dinner on Friday.

And as I was about to cross the street, to walk over to Sidewall Pizza, there was father standing on the other side of the street with his son, maybe 3 or 4 years old, standing next to him.

His son started to go out into the street without looking. And very quickly, the father put his arm down to block the child. So his son didn't go any farther.

But imagine if the child had made it into the street. And you're the father.

What are you going to do?
You're going to race into the street!

And in the middle of the street, are you going to explain to the child how much you love the child and care for the child, but it's important to understand that cars go fast and cars might not see the child and could easily hurt the child?

No.

You're going to GRAB the child.

You're going to CARRY the child back out of the street and you just might SCARE that child so that they don't EVER think about running into the street, without checking for cars, ever again!

And why would you do it that way?

Because you LOVE the child.

Because there is URGENCY to a moment like that.

Maybe that's what's going on with this parable.

Sometimes, the love of Jesus does not look like patience.

Sometimes, it looks like URGENCY.

By the way, that's our sermon series topic today.

In our sermon series The Fabric of Faith, our subject today...
is urgency.

Because I believe there's URGENCY in the heart of God
when it comes to closing the chasms in our world.

It's why Jesus spent so much time with tax collectors and Pharisees and prostitutes and people with means and people on the fringes...all sorts of people.

Why did he do it?

He did it to get rid of the chasms.

Why do you think Jesus called Simon the Zealot AND Matthew the tax collector to be a part of his inner circle?

Simon and Matthew would have wanted nothing to do with each other.

They would have despised one another!
 But Jesus said no, I need BOTH of you.
 Why did he do it?
 He did it...to get rid of the chasm.

One could make the argument that closing chasms is what the ministry of Jesus was all about.

I say, "One could make the argument..."
 The Apostle Paul made PRECISELY that argument.

In our first scripture lesson today, Paul wrote to the church in Corinth:

"...in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself...and has given us the ministry of reconciliation."

In other words, the ministry of closing chasms...

This past week, I asked the Thursday morning Bible study what the rich man could have done to address the chasm that was right outside his door...

The Thursday morning Bible study, that's a sharp group.

The first person who answered said that the rich man could have brought Lazarus some food.

That would have started to close the chasm.

How often should he have brought him the food?
Every day, came the answer.

Good, good.
Would that have gotten rid of the chasm?

There was a pause. And someone else said:
The rich man shouldn't have just brought him food.
He should have invited Lazarus into his house to eat at his table.

An even better idea, I said to the Thursday morning Bible study.
Let's keep going! Let's rewrite this parable.

So now Lazarus is eating at the rich man's table...is he doing this every day?

Yes, yes, every day.
And after he eats at the rich man's table each day, does the rich man send him outside the gate to sleep at night?

Remember, there's no Interfaith Housing Network back in Jesus' day.

Where should Lazarus sleep at night?

Someone at the Bible study said:
The rich man should have built Lazarus a place to live right next to the rich man's house.

There we go.
Now Lazarus is well fed and has shelter over his head.
Does that mean that Lazarus is no longer the rich man's problem?
Is he...was Lazarus...EVER a problem?

Maybe that's the problem.
Seeing any child of God...as a problem.

Treating them like a headache or calling them THOSE PEOPLE or seeing someone else as temporary problem to be handled appropriately so that I can just get on with my life...instead of a person who deserves dignity and some investment from my life...

Throughout my ministry, one of the most frequent questions that members of churches I serve have asked is what to do when someone asks for money outside our gate, so to speak.

On the one hand, we know that giving money doesn't solve the root of anyone's problem.

On the other hand, we know that Jesus said when feed the hungry and give shelter to those without a home, you do it for me.

So there's always this tension.

And in one of the churches I served, one of the members came up with a creative way of living with that tension. She didn't give money. But in her car, she always kept a brown paper bag with a bottle of water, and a pair of socks, and a Kind bar or some such, and card referencing a local agency that can provide more long-term help.

And whenever she drove by someone asking for help, that was what she gave them.

It was her way of bridging the chasm.

I'll never forget a scene in one of Jonathan Kozel's books.

Kozel has written very movingly for 50 years about the searing poverty and inequality in our country.

And in this book, he asks a pastor about referring people to agencies that can help. It's what I do...tell people who need help about United Ministries for example.

And the pastor's reply has always stuck with me. She warns Kozol against getting too complacent with that response.

Make sure the point is not "emotional protection" she tells him.

"Looking into the eyes of a poor person is upsetting because normal people have a conscience.

"Touching the beggar's hand, meeting his gaze, makes a connection. It locks you in. It makes it hard to sleep, or hard to pray. If that happened, you might be profoundly changed, the way that Paul was changed.

"Writing a check...can't do that. [Sending a check says that someone else] will do the touching for you."²

It's hard work, closing chasms.
But according to Jesus, it's the most urgent work we have to do.

Can you think of any chasms that God is asking you to try to close...in the world out there, or maybe even...right in here?

² Jonathan Kozol, *Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation*, New York: HarperPerennial, 1995.

A number of years ago, a woman named Janice Wilberg wrote about her relationship with her parents. Her family was the type that did the “silent treatment” when they were mad at each other...

On one occasion that silence lasted 12 years.
For a dozen years, Janice did not speak with her parents.
Their only communication was a Christmas card.

But one year, a different card arrived in the mail.
It was from her father.
It contained three simple words: “I’m so sorry.”

It was a step—to close the chasm.

Letters started to go back and forth, and a year later, Wilberg took her family to see her parents again. A few months after that, her mom died. A year and ½ later, her father died.

But Wilberg was grateful for the time she got to spend with her folks at the end of their lives.

“My father’s three words saved me from being an orphan,” she wrote. “Maybe there are other members of the grudge-holding culture who might listen to my story and make the move.

It’s not too late.”³

It’s not too late...you know, those words give me an idea.

A few minutes ago, I asked where the grace was in today’s parable.

³ Janice Wilberg, “The Power of Saying You’re Sorry,” in *Newsweek*, September 5, 2008.

Maybe the grace that I was hunting for at the beginning of the sermon, trying to find it in today's parable...maybe for us, it's not in the parable.

Maybe the grace we're looking for...is in the HEARING of the parable.

In what we do with this parable.
After all, it's not too late.

We still have time to consider our relationships...
with those we love and know,
with those children of God whom God
just might want us to get to know.

Wherever there is distance, we still have time to take step...maybe even lots of steps...to close the distance.

Maybe if I treat the chasms in my life and in this world with more urgency than watching the NCAA tournament—I mean, I'm not trying to step on anyone's toes here, I just know what my own habits are like in the month of March...maybe if we reach out TODAY to bridge a chasm in our lives, maybe we won't have to go searching for God's grace in a parable that Jesus preached long ago.

Maybe that grace will find us.
And whatever distance we can not bridge, that grace will carry us across the divide.

Amen.