

Bridge the Gulf Luke 16:19-31

The Rich Man and Lazarus

[ppt] Jesus' parables are often difficult and even enigmatic so they are not always easy to understand. I believe today's parable is one of them. But, first, I would like to remind you that this parable is not about heaven and hell. Jesus spoke this parable in the presence of "the Pharisees, who were lovers of money." They ridiculed Jesus after hearing his teaching that "You cannot serve God and wealth." Context matters. So the intention of this parable is not about the hereafter. Rather, this parable is about a call to holy living. It's an invitation to live as though God's kin-dom is already in us and among us. So bear this in your mind as we explore the meaning of today's parable.

The Story of Reversal

In the parable, there was a rich man and a poor man named Lazarus. The rich man wore a purple garment made of fine linen, which is the color of royalty. He was not only rich but also of high social status. In the time of Jesus, it was common to equate wealth with virtue. Also, wealth was understood as a sign of God's favor and blessing. Good people who worked hard and lived righteously could expect to be rewarded with wealth and longevity. From this perspective, this rich man had almost everything, wealth, health, social status, good reputation and religious justification for who he was and what he had.

[ppt] In stark contrast, there was a poor hungry man, Lazarus. He languished at the gate of the rich man's house, hoping to get crumbs from his table. He was covered with sores, which made him unclean and unable to worship properly. Illness was often equated with God's punishment so he was likely regarded as a sinner. He was poor, sick, and unclean. No one would say that he was blessed, but don't forget his name. Lazarus means "God has helped."

Eventually, both the rich man and Lazarus die, as we all do. Who would go to paradise in terms of conventional wisdom? The rich man. But the idea that the rich man was a good man was directly challenged by Jesus' parable. Lazarus was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. God helped Lazarus, who could not help himself. What happened to the rich man? The nameless rich man found himself in a place of punishment, Hades.

Do you think that the rich man did something terribly wrong to deserve the agony of fire in Hades? Since he ended up in Hades, we may assume that he must have been a bad guy, but the parable doesn't really talk about the misdemeanors of this rich man. Some point out that "Lazarus was allowed to lay at the gate of the rich man, receiving crumbs. The idea that crumbs would fall from the rich man's table all the way out to the front gate seems unlikely, so whatever crumbs Lazarus was living on came to him through the largess of the rich man in the house. Lazarus wasn't chased away and perhaps was fed – not healed, but fed."¹ Well, this rich man might not be generous to Lazarus but he was not a complete bad guy, especially compared to our contemporary practices toward the poor.

[ppt] I bet you have seen this kind of sign. "Private Property. No loitering. No trespassing." Those signs are often posted at the entrances of so-called "Gated Communities." Imagine what would happen if a homeless person slept at the gate. The security guard or police officers would chase the person away. Right? At least, this rich man in the parable put no such

¹ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/having-words-with-jesus/sixteenth-sunday-after-pentecost-year-c-lectionary-planning-notes/sixteenth-sunday-after-pentecost-year-c-preaching-notes>

sign on his gate and allowed Lazarus to sit there. In addition, this rich man knew Lazarus' name. He knew who was laid at the gate. So this rich man was not really a merciless person, but he ended up in Hades! This sounds like trouble for us since our common practices toward the homeless and poor are harsher than this rich man's. Are we, all, destined for Hades?

A huge Chasm

As you continue to read the Bible, you will come across a more puzzling scene. The rich man, unable to withstand the heat of hellfire, pleaded with Abraham. '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.' How did Abraham respond to his request? "Child, remember that in your lifetime you got the good things and Lazarus the bad things. It's not like that here. Here he's consoled and you're tormented. Besides, in all these matters there is a huge chasm set between us so that no one can go from us to you even if he wanted to, nor can anyone cross over from you to us.' A cold response!

[ppt] What caught my attention in this parable was the huge chasm between the formerly rich man and Lazarus. What kind of chasm is it that Abraham and the poor rich man can see and talk to each other while they cannot cross over the gulf? As I said in the beginning, this is not about a chasm between heaven and hell. I believe it is the chasm the rich man set between himself and Lazarus. A physical distance between them was only from his banquet hall to the gate but there was an insurmountable chasm between them. His love of wealth over love of people desensitized him to Lazarus' suffering and eventually dehumanized Lazarus so that he could treat Lazarus with indifference. The rich man could see and talk with Lazarus but his indifference to Lazarus's agony created an unbridgeable gulf between them. In fact, the rich man didn't really see Lazarus as a fellow human being even after his death. He saw Lazarus only as a slave or subhuman whose purpose was to serve him. So he asked Abraham to send Lazarus to dip his finger in water to cool his tongue. This story of the chasm between them sounds familiar to us.

There are many chasms in our society. [ppt] In this picture, you can see the growing chasm between rich and poor and how it literally divides people. Have you ever been to see the Newport mansions? What you mostly see are huge walls unless you pay admission. The rich built the walls in the name of privacy and security. [ppt] The picture on your left is a picture of the U.S.-Mexico border. The other one is the picture of the U.S.-Canadian border. We build a wall against the poor nation, but not against the affluent. The deepest chasms are in our hearts. Indifference toward the suffering of the poor and the marginalized. Indifference and even hatred toward those who have different political views. Unreasonable fear and hatred toward immigrants and those who seem different from us. Our society as well as we ourselves have built walls, which have turned into deep chasms between us. God does not create poverty. Human beings do. God does not create racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia or any other forms of discrimination and oppression. Who creates these chasms of the heart? Human beings do. And what humans create, humans can fix, if they so desire.

Cross the gulfs between us!

While the chasm between paradise and Hades in the parable is insurmountable, we can cross the gulfs between us. We can fill the gulf with hearts of compassion and hands of love. Compassion literally means "to suffer together." It has been said that "through our tears, we fill and bridge the chasm between you and me." To love means to rejoice together but it also means

to suffer together. We can fill the gulf with our hearts of compassion and our hands of love. Our Christ has already started this work by giving his own life for us. That love empowers us to fill gulfs between us and reach out to one another. We are participating in Christ's labor.

As you know, for the past year, Asbury UMC and Lakewood Baptist Church have worked together to serve our neighbors in need. We want to continue this meaningful work. For this, we will have a fundraising concert on October 23 at 3:00 p.m. Our sibling churches, Zion Korean UMC and Haven UMC will also work with us on this concert. I personally see this concert is a worthy effort to fill many gulfs between us. We will build a small bridge over the economic chasm and we will cross our ethnic boundaries and work with our siblings in Christ. Our cross denominational gulf will be spanned by our Food for Soul outreach project as we partner in this important work of service. I know that our small efforts may seem feeble and useless, considering the enormous chasm between us, but we don't do this work alone. God has started it and will complete it in time. So my friends. Grab your shovel of love and do your job. One by one, we will fill the gulf between us! In our labor, we will foretaste the joy of God's kingdom. Amen.