

Pentecost 16C 25 September 2022  
Luke 16:19-31  
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth  
Greg Bensted

Grace and peace to you dear brothers and sisters from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

*'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 .... [Later] Abraham [says], "between you and us a great chasm has been fixed."'* Let's pray:

Long before I came across homeless people on the streets of Adelaide, I experienced the desperation of hordes of people living rough in the rain, sleet, and biting cold on London streets and laneways. It's a humbling, if not slightly unnerving experience, to look into the eyes of a desperate woman with young children, begging for food and warmth to stave off death. It used to break my heart and it still does.

Sadly, there were also some who took advantage of people's good nature and made a fortune from begging. One fellow used to drive his red, convertible BMW from his country mansion down to London, change into his scruffy, smelly, beggar's rags, and hang around ATMs where he'd prey on the charity of others. On average, he would take home 500 British pounds per day, tax free, in the mid-nineties. A sumptuous daily feast indeed.

I am deeply affected by the suffering of others; especially women and children. I can't stand it and it makes me angry that those who should be protected and cared for, find themselves, through no fault of their own, appallingly neglected. However, compassion is a powerful and compelling force that easily overrides my anger and invites me to give whatever I can to soften their plight.

The problem is, there are far more needy than the resources I have available to support them with. Then, my anger rises again when I think of the obtuse wealth that many individuals have that could go a long way towards, if not completely, eradicating poverty. Bill Gates, the co-founder of Microsoft, was once asked whether he would stop to pick up a \$100.00 bill from the sidewalk and he replied, "No; I can't afford the time". At the time, Gates' wealth was increasing by more than \$100.00 per second from his company's operations.

Now, while it's easy for me to scoff at the uber rich, and feel morally superior to them, I'm always cautioned by a slightly worrying thought. Are those I help the many faces of Lazarus, and I, the rich man? Will they one day be comforted in the bosom of Abraham while I'm being tormented in Hades? Won't my charity reserve me a place on Abraham's knee next to those I help? Or, will I see them from afar, separated by a chasm I just can't cross? Did I give them enough? Should I have given them more? Should I have invited them to lunch? Paid for a night in a hotel? Offered them respite in my house?

I don't really think that's the point of this parable. Those are the kind of questions that arise when we read parables as literal, historical accounts. When we do that, the questions are usually endless and unanswerable. Neither should we treat parables as only metaphor or symbolism that have no implications for real-life. So, what's going on in today's parable?

First, God is concerned about the poor and expects us to be also. That's clear throughout both the Old and New Testaments. We reveal God's presence in our lives by sharing God's concerns and by acting as God acts. That doesn't mean that the poor are our ticket to heaven. We can't buy our way into heaven. We help the poor, feed the hungry, house the homeless, care for the sick, visit prisoners, work for justice; give sacrificially, because that's simply who and how disciples of Jesus are. The question isn't what's in it for me but what's in it for them. What does Christian discipleship, our faith, offer others?

Second, this life and the next are intimately intertwined. The choices we make, the words we speak, and the actions we take in this life have eternal consequences. Now I don't want to push that too far with this parable. Today's gospel isn't a theological analysis of heaven and hell. It's not a judgement that rich people go to hell and poor people go to heaven. This story highlights the seamless connection between life beyond the grave and the here and now. In the words of St Antony, "Our life and our death are with our neighbour." [1]

Finally, I'm being arrogant judging myself as the rich man and a beggar as Lazarus. There may be times when this is true, but circumstances and situations change. Life happens. At some point, we've probably all been both the rich man and Lazarus. Times when life has been good, full, and easy. Times when we've felt destitute, broken, in sorrow and suffering. We're not to make judgements about who is the rich man and who is Lazarus. Instead, it's asking us to be aware of and deal with the gates and chasms that separate us from each other.

Throughout this parable chasms are the one constant. From beginning to end the parable is full of divisions and separations. Remember the gate at the beginning? On one side of the gate lies Lazarus, covered in sores and dog slobber, hungry, relying on others for sustenance. On the other side, the rich man, dressed in fine linen and purple, sits at his table and feasts every day. At the end of the parable, we see this reversed and the gate is replaced by a chasm. On one side of the chasm Lazarus sits comforted in the bosom of Abraham, in heaven. On the other side, the rich man stands tormented in the flames of Hades.

The gate and the chasm are the same thing. The chasm that separates Lazarus and the rich man in the next world is simply a manifestation of the gate that separated them in this world.

The gate that separates and divides us in the world isn't based on categories like rich or poor, black or white, moderate or conservative. The gate of division is a condition of the human heart. The gate that becomes a chasm always exists within us before it exists between us.

That means we must each examine our own heart to find the gates that separate us from our neighbours, our enemies, and ultimately, God. What gates do we live with? Fear, anger, greed, pride, prejudice, loneliness, sorrow, addiction, busyness, indifference, apathy, shame, selfishness, hurt, resentment, envy, cynicism. You get the idea. We all have them. That's not how we're intended to live. Gates are barriers to relationships. Gates shut out God's creation.

Every time we love our neighbour as ourselves, every time we love our enemies, every time we see and treat others as created in the image and likeness of God, gates are opened and chasms are filled. The playbook for this is the Bible, and particularly, the life and teachings of Jesus. We are to follow his way in every aspect of our lives - our marriages, families, friendships, at work and school, in shopping centre car parks, and in our prayers for the world, so that his love may flow, heal, and save.

This can happen in the most intimate of relationships, with strangers, and even with our enemies. I'm not suggesting it's easy and we will fail from time to time. But it is possible. Jesus demonstrated that in his life, death, and resurrection. Gates were opened and chasms were filled. His love, grace, mercy, and presence make it possible for us to open our gates so that they don't become chasms.

Saints, our work with God in his mission to save the world, is to repent of our ways, believe in and follow him. We already have everything we need. That was Abraham's point in refusing to send Lazarus to the rich man's brothers. Abraham wasn't denying them anything. They already had everything they needed. They had the word of God. The word of God that opens gates and fills chasms is the same word of God proclaimed by Moses and the prophets, the same word through which the Holy Spirit works and strengthens faith today; indeed, the very same word that became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the image of perpetually opened gates and filled chasms. May we, the church of Jesus, be a mother who bends low to help and defend those who are lost. May we be a comforting beacon, proclaiming to all people that at least in one place in this world of hate and revenge there is love, because, beyond all human understanding, Jesus died for this world. And I pray that you, Dear Saints, will never lose your way and fail to find him who comes to meet us from the other side; Jesus Christ, love incarnate. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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[1] "Our life and our death are with our neighbour" – this is a spiritual affirmation from the Christian tradition which we owe to Saint Anthony, a monk from Egypt of the third and fourth century. This is our common legacy from the early years of Armenia and its Christian history. To be human is to be part of the one humanity. From the first day of our life we depend on others. Today we are reminded in a dramatic way that belonging to one another is our destiny, for better or for worse. The gift of life together includes our responsibility for one another. This is a matter of being human, created by God for fellowship and unity' (World Council of Churches).

<https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/our-life-and-our-death-are-with-our-neighbour-commemorating-a-genocide-affirming-our-common-humanity> accessed 21/09/2022.

"oikoumene", pronounced (oy-kou-men'-ay) means ["to inhabit, dwell"; "the inhabited earth" (see Matthew 24:14)]. It's the biblical Greek word from which we derive the words, "Ecumenism and Ecumenical" (different Christian denominations working together to promote unity). The logo representing the World Council of Churches has the word, "oikoumene" arched over a boat with the cross as its mast:



(Normally coloured, red).