

Bridging the Chasm

Luke 16:19-31

Whitefish UMC

September 26, 2010

- † Our waitress, Melinda, brought us the check at the café in Ritzville, Washington. “May I ask you folks where you are headed?” We told her that we’d be traveling south to the Tri-Cities and then on to the Oregon Coast. During the course of our meal, we’d visited a bit with Melinda about her life and her community.
- † Her eyes brightened, and she said, “Well I also work as a park ranger at Palouse Falls, which is right on your way—why don’t you stop by if you’ve never been there!” We promised we would try, and we eventually wound our way across the high desert of eastern Washington to a most remarkable place.
- † If you love geology, you really ought to visit Palouse Falls. For there in the midst of rolling high plains is a canyon, a chasm, so great and stark that it startles you when you see it. It was caused by the great glacial floods that created Lake Missoula thousands of years ago—but that’s another story.
- † Today’s gospel story from Luke is a parable that Jesus told about a different kind of chasm. It’s a sad story that ends with two men dying—one rich and the other poor. The poor man, who has suffered all his life, finds himself in the arms of Father Abraham. The rich man, blessed every day of his life with all the best things, discovers himself in the torment of hell and begs the poor man for water to cool his tongue.

- † But Abraham, cradling the poor man to his side, tells the rich man it's impossible because "a great chasm has been fixed" between them. There is no way to get from here to there or from there to here. Because you see the great chasm was already created there while the two were still alive.
- † As Barbara Lundblad says, Jesus paints the contrast in painfully clear images as the parable begins...a rich man dressed in purple and fine linen/a poor man covered not with fine linen but with sores...a rich man who feasted sumptuously/a poor man who longed for the crumbs from the rich man's table.
- † Why? Why was there such a great chasm between the rich man and Lazarus while they were alive? We could quickly answer that the rich man was hard-hearted and selfish and mean. But Jesus paints him instead as a man with great compassion for his family. He pleads with Abraham on behalf of his five brothers. And Abraham speaks to him with a term of endearment, calls the rich man "Child," and speaks to him with pity.
- † But Abraham (standing in for God) still speaks a word of judgment and denies his request to warn his brothers of their possible fate. Abraham replies: "They have Moses and the prophets, they should listen to them." But what does it mean to listen to Moses and the prophets?
- † Just as it is with other parts of scripture, it is possible to read Moses and the prophets in many different ways. The rich man could have believed he was following Moses and the prophets. Indeed, it may be the case that his interpretation even caused the great crevasse between himself and Lazarus. It's possible that some of these same interpretations widen the great chasm even in our own time.
- † It's not so simple to figure out what Moses and the prophets say about wealth. In Deuteronomy 28 we read these words: "If you will obey the

Lord your God...these blessings will come upon you.” And the blessings include city and field and fruit and flocks—a glorious prosperity gospel!

- † The rest of that same chapter in Deuteronomy (one of the five books of Moses) is filled with curses—curses that will come upon those that do not obey God. These curses are the direct reversals of the blessings described for those who DO obey God. One in particular is noteworthy:
- † “The Lord will strike you on the knees and on the legs with grievous boils of which you cannot be healed, from the sole of your foot to the crown of your head.” (Deut. 28:35) Notice how it closely resembles this description of Lazarus in Jesus’ parable: *And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores...even the dogs would come and lick his sores.*
- † Jesus chooses his description with purpose: this man Lazarus could be the embodiment of the curse from Deuteronomy. So his condition must be his own fault, right? The great chasm that exists between the poor and the rich men is because the poor man disobeyed God. The rich man, in this interpretation, doesn’t have to do anything for the man lying at his gate.
- † Wrong. Jesus will not abide by this interpretation. He argues directly against it, for he knew other words in scripture, in the very book of Deuteronomy, where God tells the people: “You shall open wide your hand to your brothers and sisters, to the needy and the poor...” (Deut. 15:7-11)
- † But it doesn’t end with the books of Moses. Indeed, in Amos, Jeremiah, and Isaiah, we hear echoes of God’s command to help the poor. Isaiah writes: *Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? (Isaiah 58:6a,7)*
- † “*And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus covered with sores...*

- † Which reading of Moses and the prophets will we choose? It's no secret where Jesus comes down: "The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham." Poverty is not a sign of disobedience and wealth is not a sign of faithfulness. It was poor, hungry Lazarus--not the wealthy man--who was embraced in the bosom of Abraham.
- † But Jesus didn't tell this parable to scare the hell out of us. Jesus told this parable to change the way we are living this side of heaven! We're feasting sumptuously and Lazarus is still hungry. Of course, there isn't only one man named Lazarus. There are millions of men, women and children who long for even a crumb that falls from our tables. Many of them are far beyond our gates or our front doors--we will never even know their names. Every 3.6 seconds another person dies of starvation. That means about 250 people will die while I am preaching. But I won't see them--most of us won't see them.
- There is a great chasm between us and the millions of people who are starving.*
- † I know this is overwhelming. I'm overwhelmed when I hear these numbers. I feel guilty and maybe you do, too. But guilt won't feed anybody. Jesus didn't tell us exactly how to close the great chasm between rich and poor, but he surely thought there shouldn't be one. What could have changed the rich man? What will change us?" (Lundblad)
- † One thing, I believe, that will change us is to really see and listen to the poor people among us right here and wherever we find ourselves in the world. It's not enough just to give money, although that's important. We need to pay attention to the stories of real neighbors who are poor and struggling—lying at the proverbial gate.
- † I am reading a wonderful book right now called Cutting for Stone, by Abraham Verghese. It begins in Ethiopia in 1954 in a mission hospital

staffed by a motley crew of doctors from Madras, India, British nuns, and misfit leftover Italians from Mussolini's occupation.

- † Ironically, the Ethiopians can't pronounce "mission" and so the hospital becomes known as "Missing Hospital," which is apt, since most of its patients are the forgotten poor of the capital.
- † In one poignant scene after a terrible calamity has befallen their medical team, the Carmelite nun who is the hospital administrator is visited unexpectedly by a Baptist preacher from a church in Houston that has funded some of the hospital's work. He enters the Matron's office and notices stacks of dusty bibles lining the walls. Two operating theaters have become storerooms for many other bibles, since the hospital doesn't have the resources to use the rooms for their intended purposes.
- † When the preacher asks why the bibles haven't been distributed to the patients and the people of the city, the Matron gently reminds him that the vast majority of the people are illiterate and so poor that they have no hope of learning to read. But believing that the bibles had magic curative powers, people had taken to eating the pages, which often made them sicker.
- † *There is a great chasm between us and the millions of poor people who are starving.*
- † Sometimes we mean well—we send proverbial bibles when something more immediate is needed. What then, will help us bridge this gap more significant than the one at Palouse Falls?
- † A year ago, a miracle happened in our church. With only two weeks to prepare, and on one of the coldest days of the year, seventy of us took part in our first CROP Walk to benefit hungry people who have to walk many miles for food and water around the world and in our own country. We raised a lot of money for Church World Service and for our Food Bank.

† Next Sunday Columbia Falls UMC will conduct its CROP Walk on World Communion Sunday. So far, no one has come forward to organize a CROP Walk this year in our church. Last year Joanna did it heroically, but this year she has a new grandbaby that needs her attention. It doesn't have to happen the same weekend, or really, even at all.

† I confess that I was going to end this sermon a different way. But as I was writing, I received an email from Art Ziemann, from Church World Service in Denver. This is what it said:

† “Joanna Griffin said she was going to be out of town, so I just wanted to check to see if you needed anything for CROP hunger walk planning. It was so great to meet you at annual conference in Billings in June and see you and your church recognized for your ministry successes. And I like the CROP photos on the website from last year—makes me feel like I was there.”

† Hmmmm. Do you believe in interventions from God through ordinary people and even through contact emails from our website? I do. How about it? Is there are group of us that could help pull a CROP Walk together sometime this fall and before the snow gets too deep? I'm willing to help. We already have the resources—signs, forms, information—a whole box of stuff.

† Back to the parable: “Abraham said to the rich man, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’” Well someone has risen from the dead. It is Jesus Christ, our risen Lord. And he is calling us to give Lazarus something to eat.

† What more do we need?

Sources:

Barbara Lundblad, “Closing the Great Chasm: Faith and Global Hunger,”
<http://day1.org>