



## SUNDAY SERMON

# Lest the Chasm Be Forever Fixed

*The Gospel according to Luke, chapter 16, verses 19-31*

*Jesus said, "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.'"*

The front door of the church where I served in Connecticut faced out on a city park. With a wide pavement and deep overhang, the entry created something of a shelter. I knew many of the people who spent time in the park; they came to the church for food or a priest or a prayer or to use the restroom. One February morning when I arrived, the sexton and I found one of the regulars asleep in the doorway, an empty vodka bottle nearby. Only he wasn't asleep; he had died. The sexton and I knelt down, prayed, blessed, and called the police. A short while later, as I sat with our bible study group, we looked out the window through the hush of falling snow, watching them put William's body in a bag and take him away.

I've never known anything about him – his background or family, or if he had siblings or children – but William resides forever ... forever outside the threshold, yet forever within my heart, in the ever-expanding catholicity of my heart.

Jesus' image of a chasm fixed sounds a chilling alarm, with the full weight of eternal judgment bearing down upon the hearer. Our action and inaction has consequences. In the parable, the chasm has been fixed. For the rich man, it is too late. But the chasm, we pray, is not yet fixed for us. For us, Jesus' listeners, it is not yet too late.

The rich man, we are told, lived his life with Lazarus at his gate. We are not told explicitly of the relationship between the two – only that the one was dressed in purple and fine linen and feasted sumptuously every day, while the other was covered with sores licked by dogs, and who hungered even for scraps. And of their relationship we know that, while the distance between their lives was vast, they were separated only by a gate, which is to say, a threshold; a gate which might have opened between the two but which in this case remained shut.

### DATE

The Nineteenth Sunday  
after Pentecost  
Sun., Sept. 25, 2016

### PREACHER

The Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

### READINGS

Amos 6:1a,4-7  
Psalm 146  
1 Timothy 6:6-19  
Luke 16:19-31

*Continued*

The rich man is condemned because he did not or could not see Lazarus at his gate. We can ascribe all manner of motives to the rich man and, indeed, we are invited to judge his behavior harshly. One imagines he was consumed by his consumption, utterly preoccupied with satisfying his own needs and thus oblivious to the needs of others. His wealth blinded him. If he had been warned, perhaps ... which is what he proposes be done that his five brothers may yet be spared.

No, contends Father Abraham; you, your brothers, and everyone else who may be listening have already been given everything you need to know about Lazarus, for you have been given the teaching of the law and the prophets.

The parable may shock, but in truth, Jesus is simply stating the facts; for what is this but an accurate observation of the economic and political imbalance of society – as it was, is, and likely shall be. The rich and the poor intractably divided, at least in this lifetime, by no more than a gate.

We too have been given the teaching of the law and the prophets so we know that each person is a child of God, each person is our sister and brother, and each person is called to be an agent of God's justice and mercy, to bridge the divisions, repair the breaches in our day.

Let me take a time-out here and ask you to take note of your posture right now – not how you're sitting, but how you're positioned in relation to this story, to Jesus' words or my words. Have you assumed a posture of indignation directed at all those rich people – let's put Wells Fargo's CEO back on the stand and grill him. Or maybe you've lived with poverty and know firsthand the view from Lazarus' stoop; a life in anticipation of God's great reversal with the mighty brought down and the low lifted up. Many I imagine, knowing privilege, feel convicted. Aware of all that we have, and of the dire needs of so many, we think "uh-oh, this tale is directed toward me." Being people of action and good intention, we think now, "what should I do to make a difference?" "what can I do to fix this?"

To be honest, that's my first response: wondering how my own pursuit of my own needs makes me an unintended yet active contributor to the growing economic divide. What can I do to help the Lazarus at my doorstep? If I'm honest, I'll acknowledge that I like that posture because it allows me to maintain agency. It sets in motion a familiar cycle: I feel guilty, then act to assuage my guilt, then feel justified. I'm not proud of that; just being honest.

So this is precisely where the parable strikes home for me: how about instead of me helping Lazarus, suppose Lazarus is here to help me – or you? What if I'm the one in trouble, who cannot see the truth; I'm the one who is lost, caught up in some socially acceptable if inescapable cycle of climbing and reward that impoverishes others?

What if Jesus is suggesting I relinquish my posture of trying, helping and fixing others, suggesting instead that I assume a posture of dependence and need? What will Lazarus do for me?

As I understand it, God's end game – the kingdom of God – is a realm of justice, of just relationship. Getting from here to there, in the shorthand of the prophets, is a matter of sorting out what belongs to whom and returning it to them, reparations if you will. That's what God is up to.

So I imagine that God has taken a look at me, and a look at you, and wondered to God's self, "What am I going to do with this one? Well-intentioned, shows promise, but keeps thinking that they're in charge. So let me break ... no," says God, "not break their heart, necessarily, but break open their hearts. Let me open their heart to the fragility of this life, the delicate grace-filled balance of just relationships. Maybe I'll give them an infant to hold and care for, or I will lead them to live for a time among refugees, ask them to sit with a woman in prison, or open the door of their church and give soup to a child who is homeless. I will ask Lazarus to go and sit at their door, until they notice."

And, you know, I think, when we pay attention, we see that God is doing this all the time, offering occasions that have the potential to break open my heart or yours.

If you have not yet done so, read *Hillbilly Elegy*. Author, thirty one year old J.D. Vance, is – he says – a hillbilly from Kentucky, a US Marine and, through an unlikely turn of events, a graduate of Yale Law. He writes, "I want people to know what it feels like to nearly give up on yourself and why you might do it. I want people to understand what happens in the lives of the poor and the psychological impact that spiritual and material poverty has on their children. And I want people to understand ... that for those of us lucky enough to live the American Dream, the demons of the life we left behind continue to chase us." (That's: *Hillbilly Elegy* by J.D. Vance).

If you have not yet done so, on our doorstep you can visit the National Museum of African American History and Culture, whose founding director Lonnie G. Bunch III, says "Even if you think this isn't your story, it is." A perfect title for this parable, and for the apparently endless stream of senseless deaths of black people in this nation: "Even if you think this isn't your story, it is."

If you have not yet done so, notice the Lazarus who lives on your block, outside your office, at your metro stop, or the Lazarus on the stoop here at St. Columba's.

My dad is a priest and served for many years as the rector of a church on the lower west side of Manhattan. At some point along the way, he was aware of a man who came and worshipped each Sunday. Each Sunday was the same: the man entered from the street after the worship had begun, spent much of the time on his knees in prayer, received communion, and disappeared before my father had a chance to greet him. From the man's appearance, my father sensed he probably lived on the street and was ... different, un-well. Eager to help, Dad grew frustrated that he kept missing him. One morning after worship, Dad saw the man across the street, ran over, greeted him warmly, and asked what he might do for him.

Said the man, "ever since I first came and saw you up at the altar, I could see you need help, so I've been coming each Sunday to pray for you."

Lest the chasm be forever fixed, God sends angels of light, God sends Lazarus to our doorstep. God, open our eyes to see, break open our hearts to receive your love poured out. Amen.