Lest the Chasm Be Forever Fixed

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

Luke 16:19-31 ~ September 25, 2022

God, open our eyes, our hearts, our minds – that we may receive your love.

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. 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. The distance between their lives was vast, yet 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.

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.

This blindness – the learned capacity to not see the person or thing right in front of you… this is an affliction particular to those with privilege, enabling them – or us (I know it well in my own family) – to continue in our ways, feeling somehow immune; that we are not responsible; not even related. This is a remarkable feat of the privileged. It is stunning, common, routine, and devastating.

If he had been warned, perhaps… 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; you have been given the teaching of the law and the prophets; you do not need more information.

The parable may shock, but Jesus is simply stating the facts; for what is this but a clear-eyed observation of the economic, 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 – and blindness.

Let me pause 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? 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?” I hear Jesus’ warning. So, “what can I do to fix this?”

To be honest, that’s my first response: I wonder 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 this posture because it allows me to maintain agency. It sets in motion a familiar cycle: I hear a story like this, I feel guilty, then act to assuage my guilt, then feel justified. I’m not proud of that; I’m 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 first, and, ultimately, me as well. The poor are not a problem to fix, they are our siblings reaching out a hand and, in so doing, may teach us what it means to be in relationship. 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?

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. Disrupting patterns, repairing breaches, opening gates, lessening the chasms.

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 to open the door of their church and give soup to a child who is homeless. I will ask them to step outside yet again in hopes that ***this*** time they will see and respond to Lazarus – at their gate, outside their office or metro stop, on the stoop of their church.”

God is doing this all the time, offering occasions that have the potential to break open my heart or yours. In a host of ways these days, we are being called, collectively, to see the ways in which the past pursuits of the privileged powerful led to the diminishment of others. I am grateful that a number of parishioners are currently diving into the historical, theological, moral, and practical implications of reparations – that they may lead us to consider how we’re called to this next step in God’s justice of sorting out what belongs to whom and returning it to them. Where will you look? Who is God inviting you, imploring you, to see this week?

My dad was 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.