

Bridging the Chasm

A sermon by Joe Hoffman

Text: Luke 16:19-31

September 30, 2007

This well traveled story of Lazarus and the rich person can be found in at least seven different versions among the rabbis. Sometimes it involves a wealthy merchant and a poor teacher. In another it is a rich and haughty woman and her servile husband. The meaning is the same no matter who the particular characters are.

This parable in Luke's gospel is the only parable in the scriptures that uses proper names – and Luke uses two – Lazarus and Abraham. This makes it particularly Jewish in nature, and the use of the name Lazarus makes us think of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead – a story found in John's gospel – but we don't know if there is a genuine connection or not. It is a loose end that we will not try to run down today. But it is important to name it.

The story has a strong theme that runs through all of Luke's gospel – beginning in the first chapter and Mary's song. That theme is that there will be a reversal of fortunes when God's realm comes into being. The captives will be set free. The hungry will be fed. The first will be last. Luke's telling of the story of Jesus is a challenge to the way many of the Pharisees interpreted the Jewish scriptures. The Pharisees believed in a gospel of wealth. And such a position can easily be found in various places in the book of Deuteronomy. For example, in Deuteronomy 28, we can read that for those who are careful to obey the commands of God – they shall be highly favored. “Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field. Blessed shall be the fruit of your beasts, the increase of your cattle and the young of your flock. The formula was clear – wealth = blessed of God = obedience to God's commandments.

This was the Pharisees position. And it is the position of many people today. We hear it all the time.

But Jesus talked about money in a different way – not arguing against these words from Deuteronomy, just reminding the Pharisees that this was not all of the law. The story of the rich person and Lazarus is still a clear violation of the Deuteronomy text. The early texts also read: “You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor in the land (Deut 15:7-11)” And the Law of Moses in Leviticus required that the harvest be shared with the poor and the transient.

Now, this may be the most you have thought about the Hebrew scriptures in a long time. But part of the meaning of this text in Luke's gospel is to show that Jesus lived out of the heart of the Jewish scriptures. He challenged the Pharisees not from another tradition, but from the very center of their own sacred texts. It has always been imperative according to Jewish law that the poor and hungry be cared for.

In the parable, there is a distance between the rich person and Lazarus. The rich person is not judged or put down, but it is clear that this person cannot see Lazarus. Cannot see Lazarus as another human being, born of God, blessed with God's spirit. The rich person just sees wealth and status and privilege. The rich person is blind to the needs of others. But in the end, God's realm brings forth a great reversal – and all eyes are opened so that all can see. Now the rich one sees Lazarus in a favored position, and him or herself in turmoil.

Jesus spoke often of money, of power, of uncomfortable things like this. Always calling us to be aware. It was hard then – and it is hard for us still.

Last weekend, 15 of us went on a retreat at Narrow Ridge Earth Literacy Center near Washburn, TN. Our focus was to explore the rhythms that connect Earth, body, and spirit. The place we were staying is powered by solar power, so all the electrical outlets are run by batteries that are charged by the sun. We learned that sometimes, under such a power system, there is not enough electricity for everything you may want to do. For example, there may not be enough power for running the computer and watching television – especially if there have been some cloudy days. So you have to make some decisions. What is most important? And what is enough?

You and I, on the other hand, probably make most of our decisions based on what we can afford. Many people in our society have 2-3 televisions, one or more computers, a variety of appliances that are always plugged in and pulling some amount of power, and so forth. We determine how much power we will use based on what it will cost us at the end of the month. The more money we have, the more we often spend – and the less we think about where the power is coming from.

That means we are blind to some important realities.

Our power plants are often fueled by coal. The coal is mined in places like rural Virginia and West Virginia. The coal is stripped from the mountains, leaving a big scar on the land. It also means the rains will wash the soil away, causing flooding and mud problems for the communities down stream. The mining hurts Earth, it damages the local communities, and the burning of the coal increases our global warming problems.

I don't often think about that. I usually think – I want something, so I am going to plug this in, run this machine, etc. For me the source of the power is meaningless in my safe home environment where a power line brings me all I need. I am insulated from the reality of what my use of electricity means for other people and for Earth.

My using electricity does not make me a bad person. I think it is okay for me to use what I need. The question is – what do I need? How much is enough? And what am I called to do with the extra I have?

I think this was Jesus point. Jesus was saying to the people – use what you need, but share what you don't need with those who do need it. He tells this story with two

characters that we cannot identify with – we will never be as rich as the rich person, and we can't imagine ever being as bad off as Lazarus. No, if we identify with anyone in the story, it might be the 5 siblings who are still alive at the end of the parable. The ones the rich person wants to send Lazarus back to warn. But that chasm cannot be bridged. If people will not listen to the prophets and the teachers, they will not listen to someone who has come back from the dead.

But there is hope. The remaining siblings can listen. They can learn to listen and see. And I think we begin with small steps. We do a little. Those of us who have gone on this retreat are all going to try and do a little more to be aware of what our daily practices do to Earth and the other living beings on Earth. We will change the light bulbs in our homes one at a time to the compact fluorescent bulbs. We will work to unplug what is not necessary – like tv's, computers, and such that continue to pull power throughout the night. Just little things for now – which we hope will lead us to be aware of bigger things for our church and our community. The more we begin to see at home, the more we see the possibilities around us. And of course, we will work to change the laws and the policies that are so harmful to Earth and the creatures of Earth who have little or no power to speak for themselves.

I also think that we can remain open to learning and growing. That our prayer can be – God, help me to see what I cannot yet see. Help me to care in ways I do not currently care. This is a dangerous prayer. Your prayer might be answered by actually your seeing more. Don't pray this unless you are willing to see what there is to see.

Last week someone sent me an email with a video clip attached. The clip contained a short press conference with the mayor of San Diego. The city leaders had passed an act of legislation that he had promised he would veto. He had promised the voters when he ran that he would support civil unions for gay and lesbians, but not gay marriage. The city leaders had proposed marriage. The mayor made a public statement the day the legislation was passed that he would fulfill his election promise and veto the bill.

But when the bill came to his desk, he had to face it in a way he never had before. He was a good man, and he believed he worked hard for justice. But he didn't believe in this bill in his head. But then he let his heart get involved. He became conflicted, and he stayed with the conflict. And then he realized that separate but equal was not a justice position he could defend. He realized that a person should be able to love whomever they love, and still have the same rights and privileges under the law.

As he shared this, he was struggling with his emotions – something I sensed was uncharacteristic for him. He took a sip of water. Then he said: I have a daughter who is lesbian. And I have several members of my staff who are part of the gay and lesbian community. I have found myself over the past couple of days not being able to look them in the eye, I did not want to see them. And when I realized that, I knew that I was wrong. This is good legislation and I must sign it. It is not what I believed 2 years ago, but I have come to see it differently. This is the justice work I want to do. It is just different from what I thought I would do.

This is what I think Jesus is calling us to do. We can begin to bridge the chasm while we are still on Earth. We can open our eyes, we can see what is behind the curtains that protect the view of power, privilege, and status. We can make just a few small steps and begin to do things differently. And the chasm will become less. We can step into the gaps and begin to build a network of bridges that will eventually connect us all.

Jesus talked about money and power a lot. We try to strip this away from him, because we are not very comfortable talking about these things. And we don't want anyone meddling in what we think is our private affairs. I know I am that way a lot of the time. But Jesus did not change his message just because his hearers were uncomfortable hearing him. He kept talking about it. Because he knew that we cannot place our security in money, or possessions, or status, or anything else and still trust in God.

I have been working on understanding this for years now. I can tell you, it is hard to see. I know deep down that I hold onto some notion that I deserve what I have. That I am a good person and I deserve the money I make, the house I live in, the cars we drive. I grew up middle class – and we deserve these things because we work hard, because we are good people. Do you understand what I am saying.

But I know other good people who don't have what I have. I met a little girl from Iraq a couple weeks ago, and her father, and they don't have what I have. I know people who live on the streets of our city, I know them by name – and they don't have what I have. Am I really more worthy? Am I better in the eyes of God?

What would it be like if I could learn to live with enough – and share joyfully what I really don't need? What would that look like? How might that deepen my trust in God? Can my money or my house or my retirement fund really protect me? Or is God the only one in whom I can ultimately have trust? Will God provide what we need?

Well, I think so. I trust so. But only if each of us takes what is enough – not more than our share. That's all I know to say on this today. But I hope you will stay in the conversation with me. I think we all have a lot yet to learn.

Amen.