

A Great Chasm

A Message for Worship on Sunday Morning
The 4th Sunday of Lent
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
March 11, 2018
Text: Luke 16:19-31

A great story was circulating around Facebook this week. Of course, stuff of all sorts is always making the rounds on Facebook. Some of it is cute and stress relieving, like watching kittens frolic while dismantling someone's house or puppies barking at themselves in the mirror. Some of it is pure garbage, trying to convince you of something or other. Some of it is welcome news from distant family members that you don't get to see too often. And some of it, a very small portion of it truthfully, can be stories that take your breath away, making you realize that the world is full of wonderful things and amazing people, even in its darkest moments. I came across such a story this week.

The story begins with a little old lady coming up to the register at a neighborhood bookstore to pay for her purchases. The clerk, who is writing the story, describes this lady as "lovably kooky." The lady was going on and on about how much she loved the store, picking up candy and other odds and ends gleefully. The clerk already seemed concerned about whether or not she could afford the purchases piled up before her when the little old lady notices a young guy coming up behind her to pay for a

gigantic pile of textbooks he had been accumulating on the counter one at a time. The little old lady turns to the clerk and tells her to add the young man's books to her bill so she can pay for them. He refuses, sputtering that he couldn't possibly because the books would be over \$400. The clerk too was apprehensive at this sudden extravagance on the part of the little old lady. At this point the little old lady adds chocolate to his pile of books telling him, "you look like you need candy." Now both the clerk and the young man are sputtering. But the little old lady is adamant she will pay for it all. The clerk rings everything up and the little old lady pays the huge bill with a smile. The young man was in tears as he took the bags and left. The clerk asked the old woman why she would do something so extravagant. Here's her answer: "It's important to be kind. You can't know all the times that you've hurt people in tiny, significant ways. It's easy to be cruel without meaning to be. There's nothing you can do about that. But you can choose to be kind. Be kind."

Choose to be kind. This simple notion is at the heart of the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus in the Gospel of Luke. This is a unique parable among all of Jesus' parables for several reasons, not the least of which is that it's the only one where one of the characters in the parable has a name. Lazarus. Now this is a familiar name because of another very famous story about Jesus which describes Jesus raising a man, his dear friend named

Lazarus, from the dead. But it is important we be clear that the Lazarus of this parable is not the same Lazarus. Rather, Lazarus as man's name in today's parable is significant because of what it means. It is a Latinized version of another Hebrew name, Eleazar and Eleazar means, "God is my help." Good thing too because, as we learn quickly from the parable, the only help, the only kindness Lazarus receives in this parable is from God and only after he had died a pauper's death under cruel circumstances. Kindness from others who saw his plight while he was alive was completely absent in Lazarus' life. In its place was a great chasm of indifference, separating Lazarus from a person who could easily have eased his suffering. The Rich Man could easily have chosen to be kind, but he didn't. And it's important to note neither did he choose to be unkind or mean. He, in fact, didn't choose to do anything, one way or the other. He chose to be indifferent and that was the problem.

Let's take a moment to consider the Rich Man. The text is clear that he was so rich he feasted sumptuously every day. The original Greek here implies that he was stuffing himself on exotic, expensive food – a true gourmet foodie in his day with no expense spared. We also know he was rich because of his attire of purple cloth. Purple cloth was very rare, and very expensive. More than that, who was allowed to wear it was actually tightly regulated by the officials of the Roman Empire because purple was a symbol of

wealth and position within the Empire. So, if the Rich Man was wearing purple, he was somebody important. Very important.

Lazarus, on the other hand, was the very definition of abject, extreme poverty. He was more or less dumped at the gate outside the Rich Man's house though we don't know by whom. We do know he was sick, covered by sores, and he was hungry, longing to fill himself with the crumbs that fell from the Rich Man's table. That description is plenty vivid in the picture it paints but the reality which would have been known automatically by Jesus' original audience was even more horrific. In Jesus' time, people didn't use silverware or napkins when they ate. They ate with their hands and, when their hands became gunky with food, they would wipe them on pieces of bread and then throw it away. It was this bread Lazarus was hoping to get a few crumbs of. It was this bread that the dogs who were tormenting him were trying to get too. Is a picture forming in your head of this? Yuck, right?

As fate would have it, Lazarus and the Rich Man die on the same day. Lazarus was "carried away by the angels to be with Abraham" which was a lyrical way of saying he found himself in a state of blessedness, sitting with the Old Testament patriarch Abraham. The Rich Man, on the other hand, finds himself in Hades. We tend to think that Hades means hell, but at the time Jesus told this story, Hades actually referred to the place where all people waited after death to be judged before being directed to

their place in eternity. Clearly the Rich Man was not destined for good things since he was already in torment from flames. He looked up and saw Lazarus, who had by-passed Hades completely, to go straight to Abraham. Being the self-important guy he was, he called out to Abraham to ask him to send Lazarus to him with a few drops of cool water to ease his suffering. Abraham says no, reminding him that he had his pleasures in life and now Lazarus had his in the afterlife. Lazarus was finally finding comfort while the Rich Man was suffering, and that's just the way it was, Abraham said. Not only that, a great chasm separated the two realms so even if Lazarus wanted to help him, he couldn't.

Now let's stop and think about this for a minute. When they were both alive, Lazarus was separated from the Rich Man by a gate and a table. The Rich Man never even noticed Lazarus as he stuffed his face and wiped his greasy fingers on bread he threw to the dogs, right over Lazarus' head. But, then again, he must have noticed him because when they were both in the afterlife, he knew Lazarus' name. He even asked Lazarus, through his request of Abraham, for help. Think about that. He asked the man he had ignored, the man who was suffering terribly almost at his feet, for help. And, apparently Lazarus was thinking about helping him which is why Abraham said no. The distance – the great chasm between the two men – would not permit it. They had each made their choices during life and now they each were faced with the

consequences. For the Rich Man who lived in sumptuous elegance all his life, the consequences were horrible. So horrible that he asked Abraham for yet another favor from Lazarus. Send him to warn my five brothers, he pleaded. No, Abraham said. They've had the law and the prophets and haven't listened so why do you think they'll listen to someone raised from the dead?

As so often happens with Jesus' parables he ends them with a question he doesn't answer that we are left to answer for ourselves. Would the five brothers of the Rich Man listen to anyone, even a dead man raised to life, or not? If the five brothers were just as committed to their lives of luxury as the Rich Man himself, would they recognize their own sins of omission any more than he did? How many suffering people did they step over to walk through their own gates into their beautiful houses? How many hungry people did they pretend not to see as they wiped off their greasy fingers on bread tossed away? And, of course, the scariest question this parable raises for us is the one Jesus left unspoken: which of the brothers are we? We're not the Rich Man in the story, because we're still here in this life. We're not Lazarus either because we don't live each day on the sidewalk outside a rich man's home fighting off dogs for food. We are, however, one of those on the sidelines hearing the story and pondering its lesson. And it is totally up to us what we will decide, and it's a decision we have to make every single day.

Too often this parable, if it's preached on at all, is reduced down to its most elemental level: That if you make the wrong choices you go to hell where you suffer for all eternity. Part two of this interpretation is that if you suffer in this life you will be rewarded greatly in heaven after death, *and* the more you suffer, the greater your reward in heaven. Dear friends, that is quite simply a load of #@%*. This parable is NOT about bad people going to hell and good people going to heaven. It IS a powerful, vivid reminder that choosing indifference, choosing blindness, choosing not to see the suffering all around you because it's inconvenient and overwhelming is a great sin. The Rich Man's sin was not his gluttony or his greed or his smug self-assurance. The Rich Man's sin was his indifference, his complete and total indifference to the horrible suffering of a man he saw every day. The Rich Man's sin was allowing the chasm created by his wealth and privilege to keep him separated from the suffering of Lazarus and who knows how many others. The Rich Man built that chasm himself, rock by rock, day by day every time he stepped right over Lazarus collapsed on the sidewalk, every time he tossed bread over Lazarus' head to the dogs tormenting him. The great chasm between the Rich Man and Lazarus was there because the Rich Man let it stay there. Lazarus could see the Rich Man, every day. He knew who he was and he knew how great the chasm between them was, but there was nothing, absolutely nothing, Lazarus

could do to bridge that chasm. Only the Rich Man could do that. Only the Rich Man could choose to be kind. But he didn't. He didn't choose anything. He didn't do anything. And that, dear friends, was his sin. And all of ours too.

So, do I think you're stepping over people collapsed on the sidewalk, refusing to help them, even to see them? No, not at all. Do I think all of us look at the problems of homelessness and poverty and lack of decent medical care for so many and have absolutely NO idea what to do to make it better? Yes, absolutely. But, the thing is, we *can* do something. We *are* doing something here in our church. Our donation drives of household items and food and cash for the poorest in our community – small tokens in the grand scheme of things, but at least we are doing something. At least we know all those Lazarus' are out there! At least we want to do what we can, even if we often have no idea what that might be. At least we know we have so much more to learn and to do about all these problems faced by the Lazarus' in our community.

So, as Lent rolls along taking you and life along with it, I urge you to be on the lookout for all those struggling folks you encounter each week who are used to being invisible. The cashier at Dunkin Donuts, the stockperson at Walmart, the frazzled mom counting out pennies at the supermarket. Make eye contact with them and know that as you do Lazarus is looking at you from their eyes. The question is, do you see them, or not. If you do, smile

and wish them a nice day. Give that person counting out pennies at the store a \$5 bill instead of a disgruntled sigh. And remember that kooky little old lady who made a college student cry when she chose to be kind. If she can bridge the great chasm, anyone can. Even you and me. Amen.