

Lent 4 March 26, 2017
Psalm 41:1-3 Luke 16:19-31 A Yawning Chasm

I think I may have come up with the shortest sermon ever preached: “Help the poor or burn in Hell!” Okay... done! One could argue that is exactly the point of this morning’s parable. “Help the poor, or burn in Hell!” But, of course, parables are never that obvious. Parables are meant to unsettle and disconcert us, to provoke us and offer an alternative point-of-view on some aspect of our lives.

So what might we make of a parable like this one?

One commentary on this passage begins with the words of Abraham to the rich man in hell: “Between you and us, a great chasm has been fixed.” The commentator goes on to describe the ever-increasing gap between the wealthy and the poor in our world.

A recent report by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development describes the increasing gap within its 39 member states. It states that the richest 10% of our populations earn almost 10 times the income of the poorest 10%; that CEOs of companies today get paid around 300 times the salary of ordinary workers; that just 40 years ago, CEO salaries were around 20 times that of their workers. It reports that if you look at accumulated wealth, you will find that the bottom 40% of those in developed nations have only 3% of household wealth, while the top 10% have over half of accumulated household wealth.

That kind of massive redistribution and polarization of wealth currently serves to cripple billions of people and communities in our world. We forfeit their potential contribution simply because of a lack of life’s most basic necessities, and the real absence of opportunities for personal and professional advancement. Indeed, “a great chasm has been fixed between us.” And I don’t believe that it is God who has put in the fix. This morning’s parable tells us that the time to bridge that gap is now, in this lifetime, because later is far too late.

Michael and I were talking over breakfast the other day, and I said something utterly outrageous. I know it is outrageous because I feel the anxiety rise in me even as I think it. He said, “You can’t do that!” I said, “Why not? It is only outrageous because this is the air we breathe, not because it is wrong!” I ask you, “Why is the chasm fixed?”

I think, the Frances Bacon quote on the front lawn says it well! “Money is like Muck (or manure), not good except it be spread.” Mr. Bettenham elaborated, “Riches are like Muck (or manure): When it lay, upon a heap, it gave but a stench, and ill odour; but when it was spread upon the ground, then it was cause of much fruit.” I’m far less imaginative. I simply say. “There should be a limit to how much wealth a small group of people are allowed to accumulate. We need a better system of spreading the world’s resources if the people of our world are going to thrive!”

We in the United Church of Canada, and in this congregation, tend to be much better at doing charity than working for justice and fairness. We are much more ready to do

something to help the down and out, than we are to demand the creation of a more just economic and social system. Still, there are amazing organizations taking up these kinds of causes. KAIROS, is an ecumenical social and environmental justice organization, and is one of many we could choose as individuals, or as a congregation, to tap into to. If you feel called to grab an end of the rope to join what will surely be a never-ending, longer than your life-time, tug-of-war, and pull on the side of justice and fairness, there are plenty of opportunities to do so!

But I digress just a tad! Because this parable, I think, is really about being awake, aware, and responsive to those who are right in front of our eyes. I believe that is the practice Jesus is calling us to here. Lazarus is right at the rich man's gate. He's lying on his doorstep for heaven's sake! Lazarus watches as the rich man passes by in his fine clothes. He smells the rich aromas of the sumptuous feasts prepared on the other side of the wall. He is starving (if only I could join the dogs beneath the table!); thirsty--his lips cracked and bleeding. His body is covered not with fine linens, but with sores. He is dirt poor, disposable, expendable, an outcast. Surely, the rich man sees Lazarus. Surely he sees the sores on his body, the filthy rags slung across his wizened frame. He cannot help but smell the stench of poverty as day after day he passes by. The rich man sees, smells, witnesses, and he is not moved. Days, weeks, maybe months pass. Lazarus is starving for want of simple compassion.

What is important to understand here is that it was common in ancient cultures (and some contemporary ones too) to understand wealth as a sign of God's blessing, and poverty a sign of divine curse. The, "we get what we deserve" myth was in full force. Jesus turns that understanding on its head. Earlier in Luke's gospel, Jesus is overheard saying, "Woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you that are full now, for you shall hunger" (Luke 6:24). Again and again, Jesus reveals that God's blessing extends to the last and the least—that the poor and outcast are objects of God's mercy—and that they must also be beneficiaries of our mercy.

In one of the 40 Acts meditations this week, Paul Catterall shares the story of a congregation's decision to support asylum seekers flowing into their city of Teeside UK. Jubilee Church set their sites on showing the love of God to everyone seeking refuge, eventually forming a support agency for asylum seekers and refugees called Open Door North East. Catterall, sums up all that they do with one story. He writes, "A Muslim lady abused and rejected by her husband, then abandoned, was sleeping in a shop storeroom when we first met her. She eventually got her refugee status. She came to say thank you and these are the words she said to us, without realizing that she was quoting the very words of Jesus: 'I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me.'

*The OECD formed after WWII to usher in a new age of mutual economic cooperation and development, and brings around its table 39 countries that account for 80% of world trade and investment, giving it a pivotal role in addressing the challenges facing the world economy. The US and Canada are both among its founding nations.

Spill the Beans, "Division, bible notes," Issue 22, page 29,

Carol Grace Scott, "Stone by Stone," **Awakened by Ashes**, Echoe Press, page 13

Stone by Stone,

There is no Time.
There is no Space.
There is only Light
and Love.

When out of prejudice
I disenfranchise Jesus and others
By looking through old lenses,
I separate myself.

I build walls of resistance
Where I remain alone-
Longing to join
Our shared humanity.

Stone by stone
I deconstruct the walls
That had been reinforced by
by patriarchal human constructs.

Prayer by prayer
I reconstruct my faith
To include a timeless knowing
of Light and love.

Lazarus goes from starvation to feasting with Abraham.

The rich man goes from feasting to torment.