

A GREAT CHASM

Sermon on Luke 16:19-31

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In the preface of his biography *Dorothy Day: A Radical Devotion*, psychiatrist Robert Coles tells the story of the day he first met Dorothy Day, an activist known as one of the founders of the Catholic Worker Movement, which does work caring and advocating for the poor. He was a medical student considering a change of his career path, and somewhat adrift, he took the subway one day to the Catholic Worker soup kitchen on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, aiming to do some volunteer work. He knew of the place because he had audited some seminary classes and the professor had mentioned Dorothy Day's name and her work there. When he arrived, he found that Dorothy Day was in a protracted conversation with a drunk woman, who was ranting and raving as Day sat, listening and nodding. Coles found himself frustrated that their conversation was going on so long. Finally, he says, Dorothy Day asked the woman if she would mind an interruption. She then approached Coles and asked "are you waiting to talk with one of us?" Coles recalls those three words – "one of us" as indirectly summing up the essence of Dorothy Day, the movement she led, and her vision of what it meant to follow Jesus. His sense of impatience and frustration as her conversation had gone on and on reflects an assumption that the rantings of a drunk, likely indigent person, are not a high-priority conversation. Her attention to that conversation, and then her gentle inquiry – are you waiting to talk with one of us? – reflect a counter-cultural view that the drunk woman at the soup kitchen is just as important, just as worthy of attention and conversation, as the famous activist and spiritual leader or the up-and-coming medical student looking to volunteer.

The story came to mind as I reflected on the parable we heard today from the Gospel according to Luke. This parable comes only a few verses after the passage we heard last week – the strange parable of the dishonest manager forgiving the debtors who owed money to his employer, and the series of perplexing teachings culminating in “you cannot serve God and wealth.” Today, we have yet another parable touching on questions of wealth, poverty, and righteousness. There was a rich man, says Jesus, living a luxurious lifestyle. At his gate lay a poor man covered with sores, which dogs would come and lick. He longed for even the crumbs that fell from the rich man’s table. His name, Jesus says, was Lazarus.

It's interesting that Jesus gives a name to the poor man but not to the rich man – a reversal from what one might expect – it is a privilege of wealth to have one’s name known and remembered. You could probably name off the top of your head several of the world’s wealthiest people. Great institutions and buildings often bear the names of the wealthy people who first funded them. Even in churches, we tend to put commemorative plaques on buildings or items to remember donors – who may not have been wealthy, necessarily – but still there is this link between money and being known and remembered by name.

But in Jesus’ parable, it is just the opposite – the poor man is the one remembered by name. The rich man has sometimes been known by tradition as “Dives,” but that is just the Latin word for rich. Of all the parables Jesus told, this is the only one with a character who has a name; we don’t know the name of the prodigal son, or his brother, or his father; we don’t know the name of the Good Samaritan or the man he helped; not a single parable has a named character but this one. Not only is the poor man named in this parable, but he is named Lazarus – the name of one of Jesus’ dearest friends, the brother of Mary and Martha, the one whom he would later raise from the dead. By naming him at all, and by giving him the name of a dear friend, Jesus asserts that

this poor man has value and worth, that he deserves to be known and remembered, even as he describes him in a way that evokes visceral disgust.

The two men died, Jesus continues, and the poor man was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man died and was being tormented in Hades. Far away from him, he saw Abraham, with Lazarus with him. The rich man calls out to Abraham, begging him to send Lazarus to help him quench his thirst. But Abraham chides him that he has received good things already and now is experiencing torment, while Lazarus experienced torment and now is receiving comfort. And besides, Abraham says, a chasm has been fixed between the two so that it cannot be crossed.

In a sermon she preached for Day One Radio, Rev. Barbara Lundblad highlighted the phrasing, “a great chasm *has been fixed*,” the passive voice and past tense seeming to suggest that Abraham and the powers of heaven had no part in it; she wondered whether the chasm is not one between paradise and the underworld, but rather a chasm which had opened between the two men during their lives. As the rich man feasted and enjoyed the good things in life while Lazarus languished at his gates, the rich man was creating that chasm – a chasm between his wealth and Lazarus’ poverty, between his ease and Lazarus’ torment, a chasm of explanations and justifications for why things were the way they were, why it wasn’t his problem and nothing could be done. A chasm *had been fixed*. Even seeing Lazarus alongside Abraham, all the rich man sees is someone whom Abraham might deputize for his purposes – send Lazarus to help me, he bids. When it becomes clear that there is no help for him, he begs Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers, so that the same fate does not befall them.

And then there’s this poignant little exchange: Abraham says that the brothers have Moses and the prophets, and should listen to them. The rich man appeals that if someone rises from the

dead, the brothers will listen. If they don't listen to Moses and the prophets, Abraham replies, then even if someone rises from the dead – even if Lazarus rises from the dead – they will not repent. From our vantage point, we see the connections between this parable and Jesus' friend Lazarus, who will rise from the dead, and Jesus, who will rise from the dead. We hear Jesus' sorrow that there are such stubborn hearts in the world, that there are those whose minds are made up, those who are not moved to repentance by law or by teaching or even by rising from the dead.

It is a stark parable, a bleak parable, for those of us who see ourselves more in the rich man than in Lazarus. There is a word of warning here. Jesus sees how the very poor can become almost invisible to those around them – we despair, we throw up our hands, and we learn, little by little, to look away, to ignore panhandlers, to tune out and compartmentalize, because this world is so full of poverty that we can hardly bear to contemplate it. As the rich man has learned to look past Lazarus, he has widened the chasm, and in the afterlife all he sees when he looks at Lazarus is a supporting character in his own life story, someone who might serve his purposes and do his bidding.

Imagine with me for a moment: if his brothers were warned, and if they started to give away money to the poor people around them, for the purpose of earning their way to the other side of the chasm, it would be better, of course. But would it be righteousness? Because I think Jesus is saying something here about wealth and poverty, generosity and stinginess. But I think he is also saying something about compassion and self-awareness. The rich man did not know that his inaction would have consequences. If he had, he would have been generous to Lazarus. Not for the sake of generosity itself, but in order to avoid torment and earn rewards. Lazarus still would

have been a prop in the man's self-serving schemes. He would have *helped* Lazarus without really *seeing* Lazarus.

It's hard sometimes to know what to do when we encounter Jesus' teachings on wealth and poverty. It's hard for me to know what to do. On the one hand, it is true that we all are probably, on a global scale, relatively fortunate. We mostly have daily bread, and a safe place to live, the basic necessities and for most of us, quite a bit beyond that. We have heard the troubling statistics about the abject poverty that exists around the world and close to home. On the other hand, if all of us were to give away everything we had to help care for the poor, it would be like a drop in the ocean. The problem is so big, and we feel so small. There is a balance to find, and perhaps the best we can do is to sit with the unease, to not try to resolve the discomfort, to let it goad us toward doing a little more or a lot more.

But I think what Jesus was saying goes beyond numbers and dollars. I think Dorothy Day got it. There can be a chasm between the volunteer at the soup kitchen and the person getting their meal – even though the volunteer is there to be kind and generous. A chasm between the commuter waiting for the subway and the panhandler on the platform. A chasm between the haves and the have-nots, even when we're right in the same room, a sense that there is some fundamental difference between *us* and *them*. When Dorothy Day chatted with that woman while her future biographer waited impatiently, and then turned and asked “were you waiting to speak with one of us?” she was closing the chasm, insisting that she, Coles, and the woman were all neighbors, all beloved children of God, all equally worthy of time, attention, care, and love.

The parable ends with Abraham refusing the rich man's request for a resurrection. It will make no difference, he says.

And yet, Jesus rose. For me, that is where the hope is in this parable. The prince of peace crosses the chasm between life and death, between rich and poor, between sin and grace, over and over again, and invites us to a new way – a way of being and living and trusting and reaching out across the chasms that divide us, for the healing of the world.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.