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Date: 25 September 2022
Today's Word/Phrase: chasm
Lesson: Luke 16:19-31

[Jesus said:] ¹⁹“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²²The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’ ²⁵But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. ²⁶Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’ ²⁷He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house—²⁸for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ ²⁹Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ ³⁰He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ ³¹He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

I'd like us all to take a deep breath... relax a bit... because this is only a parable. Don't think that God's love for you is in jeopardy just because the other day you avoided a person asking for some money. God still loves you, and shortly I'll come back to that scenario. Just remember: this is only a parable. It is a story that is meant to drive home a point about how we live our lives in the reign of God now.

Today's parable makes its point by using the literary tools of descriptive language and opposites. For example, not only is the one man rich, but he wears robes of that hoity-toity color purple. Not only does he have food to eat, but he "feast(s) sumptuously" every day. Opposite of him is Lazarus. To say that he is poor is not enough, he is covered in sores, and dogs would come and lick them. This is some of the best use of description in the gospels, and we're only two sentences into the story. Another tool that Jesus employs is apocalyptic imagery. The challenge for us readers today is that apocalyptic storytelling was far more common in Jesus' age than it is in ours. The audience knew how to hear it and process it, but we don't.

I liken apocalyptic writing to today's genre of suspense in both literature and film. I am not a connoisseur of this media – only a dabbler in it – yet I know that the best of the genre uses the tension of suspense to convey a deeper message. For instance, I had some unexpected downtime this past week, isolated in a room in my house. One thing I did was watch a movie named "Old," which was released last year by director M. Night Shyamalan. The premise is that a group of people are stuck on a beach that somehow fast-forwards their bodies' aging process. For every hour they are stuck there, their bodies age by two years. I know that some of you are rolling your eyes at the premise of this movie and now at my sermon. So let me get to the movie's point: people react to the inevitability of mortality in different ways, but the time we have is best used by appreciating the people around us.

You see, the best examples of the suspense genre reveal a deeper message beyond the surface material. In Jesus' time, that's what apocalyptic writing was used for: it was a method of storytelling employed to startle people into hearing a greater truth. But too often today, we don't know how to read ancient apocalyptic writing, and many people are left thinking we are supposed to hear it as a literal truth. The original listeners of this parable wouldn't get hung up on the frightening imagery. So, like them, we can take our collective deep breath and try to figure out this parable's truth together.

Now, all the way back in chapter 1 of Luke's gospel we hear Mary's song, the Magnificat. She declares that God stands with the poor, and one day God will see to it that their fortunes are turned. Jesus reemphasizes this standing with the poor throughout Luke's gospel, and in this parable depicts that fortune-turning that Mary sung of. The setting is Hades – Greek concept of afterlife where all people go – and the rich man is in agony there, yet he sees across a great chasm Lazarus finding comfort, with Abraham at his side. The rich man knows Lazarus by name, but does he call out to him? No... he has the audacity to command Abraham – a pillar of the nation, mind you – to order Lazarus to do something for the rich man. *This guy isn't very self-aware, is he?* Abraham points out to the rich man that these requests can't be done because a great chasm has been fixed between the rich man and them. So the listeners of the parable ask the question, "Who fixed this great chasm?" Who is the one who always sought to separate the rich man and Lazarus? Who – even in death – treats Lazarus as trash? It's the rich man. He is the one responsible for the great chasm of separation. He is the one who has alienated himself.

He wants Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers. "If someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent," he says. Abraham's response is clearly an allusion to Jesus. "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." The message behind this is that if someone isn't convinced by Moses and the prophets that God stands with the poor, then the death and resurrection of Jesus likely won't convince them of it either.

That is the ultimate point the parable is making: the God of Israel has always stood with those who are poor and oppressed. Mary's Magnificat didn't introduce this idea, nor did Jesus and his parables. That is simply who God is, always and forever. There are over 2,000 verses in the Bible about God's concern for the poor. As an exercise, some people have tried to literally cut all those verses out of the Bible, to see how it stands. All that was left between the covers were shreds.

Although God stands with the poor and desires justice for them, that doesn't mean that God disfavors anyone because they have comforts in life. God loves you and desires to be intimate in your life. Yet that gets us to the second point of the parable. If you find that a great chasm separates you from the poor, the marginalized, or any other group of people – if you look upon them with disdain and contempt for who they are – you don't have to work very hard to figure out who is responsible for that chasm. God can heal and mend those chasms within us, but we have to first recognize them. We then have to name the influences that lead us toward this attitude of disdain, and then repent of those influences. Finally, we have to ask God to heal these chasms in our lives. To be honest, this healing is likely going to get us out of our comfort zones. Often it involves us working and interacting with the other people. It might involve a brief chat with that person asking for some money. Yet that is the key. You see, at the core of God – the triune God – is the concept of relationship. So it should come as no surprise that to heal the chasms in our hearts, it should involve a relationship with the people on the other side. The relationship doesn't have to be best friends. It just has to be enough of a conversation to see the humanity in the other, to see that they bear the image of God. That is when chasms are healed.

We must guard ourselves against the allures that create barriers between us and others. We must recognize that seeking an encounter with God requires no more than having an encounter with others around us, especially our neighbors in need. We must listen to their stories and walk with them when they pursue justice, because that is what God does. It might not be easy. It likely will challenge us and it certainly will make us uncomfortable. Yet the cross proves that in our challenges and discomforts, God meets us there.

Amen.