

**18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Luke 16:19-31**

**September 26, 2010**  
**"A Great Chasm"**

**the Rev. Michelle Slater**

*'There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He 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." But 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. Besides 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." He said, "Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house – for I have five brothers – that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment." Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them." He said, "No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent." He 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." '*

When I was looking ahead for the Scripture readings this fall, my heart sank when I came to Jesus' story in Luke today. In his story, there was a rich man, living in a huge house, dressed in fine linen, feasting every day and every night. At his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, a homeless, sick beggar. A total outcast: even the wild dogs, the scavengers of the village, would come and lick his sores. All the poor man wanted was to satisfy his hunger with the rich man's leftovers, yet the rich man was totally indifferent to the poor man outside his gate.

When the two men died, the poor man Lazarus was carried away by angels to rest in the arms of Abraham, the great patriarch of the faith, while the rich man was taken to hell to be tormented. The rich man demanded that Abraham send Lazarus to come and bring him some cold water, to comfort him in his agony. But Abraham said no. Then the rich man asked that Lazarus be sent to his five brothers, to warn them about what was in store for them. And Abraham refused again, saying, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them...and if they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

So just what does it mean to "have Moses and the prophets"? Well, it means the scripture, the Hebrew Bible. Moses was believed to be the writer of the first five books of the bible, and the

prophets continued to call out for justice for the poor, the alien, and the orphan.” Deuteronomy says, “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land,” (Deuteronomy 1:11), while Proverbs tells us, “Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honour him,” (Proverbs 14:31). Passages like these make it clear that God identifies with the poor. To walk past a beggar is to walk past God, and woe to the rich person who does.

My heart sank when I read this parable a few weeks ago, as I started to plan for the fall. And not because I don’t know the truth of the parable, the message of God’s love for the poor in scripture, which we are called to embody. Of course, I did, just as well as you all do. Many of us have grown up in the United Church of Canada, and have been well convinced about the Gospel call to care for those less fortunate than ourselves. And many of us who are here who didn’t grow up in the United Church, or haven’t been here for a while, well, many of you were attracted to the United Church, and this congregation, because of our advocacy of social justice and inclusion of the marginalized.

So I want to say to Jesus, “Hey, you’re preaching to the converted, here.” We’re here because we’ve heard this message, that each person is created in the image of God, and so worthy of respect, dignity and care. We’re here because we want to find ways to give, because we realize that we are the rich men and women of the world, whether we are a labourer, a technician, an executive, a company director, a stay-at-home parent, a minister, or unemployed and on welfare benefits. We know that we are rich compared with the millions who are disadvantaged by real poverty and famine and war. We know that we’re the ones dressed in fine linens, and that we’re going to feast sumptuously on delicious home made soup and celebratory baptism cake after church.

We get the message, all right. So why does Jesus confront us with such a detailed story, with oozing sores and slobbering dogs, the place of torment and a great chasm? Just to make us feel guilty? That doesn’t sound like gospel, like good news, to me. But I’m not sure that is Jesus’ point, because there actually isn’t any guilt in this story. You’ll notice that the rich man does not feel bad about the way he treated the man lying at his gate. He’s only unhappy now because of where he’s ended up. He liked the distance between him and Lazarus just fine when it was his own doing, but now that the distance seems fixed for good, he is in some distress, especially since Lazarus has something he really wants.

And even on the far side of the grave the rich man does not recognize that the poor man is a fellow human being. He still sees him as something less. He thinks Lazarus is Father Abraham’s gofer, someone to fetch water and take messages, but Father Abraham sets him straight. Embracing Lazarus in his arms, he says no. The rich man’s days of getting other people to do his bidding are over. Furthermore, there will be no special messages brought back from the dead for his brothers. They have Moses and the prophets just as everyone else does, and if that is not enough to get their attention then no ghost is going to get it either.

Perhaps we are to keep considering this story, even if we think we already get the message, not to make us feel guilty, which is often just paralyzing and disempowering, but because it is all too easy to keep forgetting the many stories we have heard, the many stories that we don’t hear, to put them out of our minds because they make us so uncomfortable. Maybe we

are to hear this story, over and over again, because although we know in our heads about Jesus' call to justice and compassion for the poor, we often run away from it, in our hearts. Maybe Jesus confronts us with this story of vivid, grinding, demoralizing poverty, because we have created all kinds of ways of distancing ourselves from it, so we don't have to see it, or hear about it, although we know it exists and is contrary to God's will. Perhaps what Jesus wants to keep reminding us is that this story is not actually about what happens after we die, after life *after* death, but more about what happens before we die, about life *before* death.

Maybe Jesus is trying to show us that in this life, it turns out that we rich ones, as well as the poor ones, are the victims of our own way of life. When we succeed in cutting ourselves off from each other, when we learn how to live with the misery of other people by distancing ourselves from it, by ignoring it because we can't bear it, when we just accept the way things are as "beyond our control", when we decline to see how our lives are bound together with all other lives, then we are the losers. Not because of what God will do to us, but because of what we have done to ourselves.

It's interesting that Father Abraham, when denying the rich man's request, says that "a great chasm has been fixed." It just may be that it isn't God who creates that chasm, but we ourselves; that Jesus is showing us the great chasm we have created between us and our brothers and sisters, fellow beloved children of God. And since God identifies with those poor, when we are far from them, we are far from God as well. God calls us to bridge the distance between us, to see each other face to face, to know each other's names.

I know that there are already things we do to try to bridge the gap. We give to the national church's Mission and Service Fund, to emergency aid efforts for famines and earthquakes and floods. We give toiletries and clothing and needed supplies to St. Elizabeth House, a home for women and children fleeing from violence in their homes. We give out emergency food supplies to those who have nothing to eat today or tomorrow. We make donations to First United Church on the Downtown East Side, and the Vancouver Food Bank, and Camp Fircom, a place for at-risk children and youth to enjoy God's creation and experience God's beloved community.

And yet, these ways of giving can sometimes serve to keep the distance intact, rather than shrink it. We don't see any of the people who receive our money and clothes and aid. We don't know their names. They continue to be for us the faceless, nameless people we can put into categories: "the poor" ... "the residential school victims" ... "the third world" ... "the homeless" ... "the refugees" ... "the hungry". And we are the losers, because we miss seeing God in each one. We are the losers, because of the great chasm that we have constructed, in *this* life.

I certainly don't want to discourage you from giving to all these worthy projects and efforts. But I don't want us to believe that that is enough. Together, let us think of ways we can open our gates, walk through them, and meet the people in need, face to face. Our Outreach committee has just established a perfect way to start: helping serve and then participate in the community meal on the DTES at First United Church. The second Wednesday of each month, you are invited to sign up to make your way down to the DTES, to serve food to the community there and then to sit and eat, worship, learn, sing, laugh and connect together, to cross the great chasm we Vancouverites have established between the West Side and the DTES.

Another great chasm that I often ponder is the one between Dunbar and the Southlands reserve. I often wonder how it can be that only forty or fifty blocks away, on the reserve, there live people, men, women and children, who regularly go without food and warm clothing. How could we cross the great divide between us? Not in the old colonial, paternalistic way, “here let us help you, you poor aboriginal people”, but in a genuine way that was about beginning relationships?

Whatever the ways, the good news is that this story is not over yet. For the rich man, yes, but not for us, because now that I think about it, we aren’t the rich man in the story, after all. For we are still here, still alive, still with a chance to listen, to hear, to heed, to be changed. In fact, we are the five brothers of the story. Even though Father Abraham would not let Lazarus come back from the grave to tell us this story, Jesus has done so instead. Now we have that, as well as Moses and the prophets *and* someone who rose from the dead to convince us it is true. All that remains to be seen is what we will do about it. May it be so for us. Amen.

(resources: Barbara Brown Taylor)