

Luke 16: 19-31 Proper 21 C 2016  
The Rev. Stephanie E. Parker

### **“Closing the Chasm”**

**A few weeks ago as I was driving down the road and there was a car with a bumper sticker caught my attention. It said, “THE ONE WHO DIES WITH THE MOST TOYS--- STILL DIES.”**

**I thought this was particularly funny because I remembered the bumper sticker from the consumption driven 80’s that said, HE WHO DIES WITH THE MOST TOYS WINS!”**

**This most recent version seems to capture a far more pragmatic understanding of the accumulation of wealth and the fact that you can’t take it with you when you go.**

**Today Jesus tells another very difficult story in which two men die. This is not a description of a heaven or hell, but it is what I like to call a “true story about something that never happened;” a story in which Jesus teaches us about the tangle of wealth and poverty and how to see others in our world with the eyes of God.**

**Jesus tells us that the rich man, who had lived a life of privileged luxury, is, in his death, tormented and wants the poor man who lived a life of misery and rejection to bring water to cool his tongue.**

**But Abraham, with the poor man at his side—a place of great honor, gently tells the rich man, "that a great chasm has been fixed" between them. There is no way to get from here to there or from there to here. A great chasm has been fixed and Jesus tells us that it was already there before the two men died.**

**Now, you may have noticed that in the last few weeks Luke has treated us to quite the treatise on Jesus' view of the connection between our possessions and the kingdom of God.**

**He goes on and on at length about the place of money and what it means to the disposition of our spiritual health. In fact the whole of chapter 16 in Luke's gospel is a very long sermon by Jesus on money and how it relates to our relationship to God as well as how we understand the world.**

**A great deal of our emotions are tied to our money. As I said last week, it is far too easy to be made to feel guilty and ashamed about having either too much or not enough.**

**I believe this is why both the Prophets and Jesus teach so frequently on the subject of money. God knows that there is more than one kind of way to make money an idol and God wants us to live a life that is free of both the worship of money and the fear of not having enough---either state of being represents a life of true bondage.**

**Now, just prior to what we hear today, the Pharisees have ridiculed Jesus publically because he said, *“You cannot serve God and wealth.”***

**Jesus and his attention shifts sharply from his disciples to the Pharisees who are standing nearby and he says to them, “You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination to God.” Jesus has accused them of setting up wealth as an idol.**

**Jesus wants to challenge their skewed understanding of blessings, which held that wealth and status was a sign of God's favor and that poverty and sickness, was a sign of God's disfavor for sinful behavior. This was the way that many very wealthy, religious people were able to ignore the poor and suffering as if they were invisible.**

**In Jesus' description of the rich man passing by this suffering man we get the impression he believes he has done nothing wrong in ignoring Lazarus because poverty is a sign of God's punishment and disfavor; poverty and sickness is the direct result of disobeying God. In this reading it is the rich man's duty to ignore Lazarus.**

**To be poor is to be invisible in so many ways. I was reading blog about an economist being interviewed on NPR, advocating that cash is no longer needed, and that cash is just a way of committing crimes--- essentially saying only criminals do pay with cash.**

**The commentator noted that gone from this NPR conversation was any recognition of the poor, who often work for cash, who do not have bank accounts, who keep their money on their body, who pay rent by the**

**week, who have no credit cards, who sleep in cars or doorways when work is scarce, and who struggle to find any kind of healthcare. <sup>1</sup>**

**There are a great many people living this way. And most of them are invisible to us, although they surround us every day. And often some go further and we ridicule them or dismiss them with the thought that it is something they did wrong or bad in life that finds them in this condition. Or they just didn't/don't have the drive to succeed—we Americans love the drive to succeed.**

**To be black is another way to be invisible, and conversely under threat in a way that white people cannot conceive of. People of color, when seen at all, are often seen as threatening and dangerous.**

**Just a quick look at the news will tell us that when a young black athlete in college is charged with a crime be it small or large, any small infraction from his past is paraded out and magnified. When a white athlete is charged with something large or small all we hear about is how bright his future was and what a loss has happened—and often**

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy Rockwell, Patheos, 2016

**young white men go free or receive very lenient sentences at disproportionate rates.**

**It can be hard for us to truly see those with whom we share the world--- especially those we do not view as admirable because of a lack of wealth, social status, or life situation.**

**Yet, over and over Jesus tells us stories about people who live proper lives yet are sinners, and people who live outside the rules – too old, too dirty, too sick, not the right ethnicity, or too illicit – yet, Jesus says, they are God’s beloved.**

**And still there are so many churches that teach personal virtue as the way to God’s heart, and what constitutes the true Christian life. Don’t drink, smoke, swear, says these churches and you will win God’s favor. In this way of thinking we earn God’s love by way of our individual merit.**

**Don’t get me wrong I’m not encouraging a life of debauchery—but we shouldn’t be confused that a life of wealth or some form of moral purity**

**is God's desire or call to us as a people of faith.**

**The truth is, Jesus never proclaimed or said anything like that. What he did do is tell stories about fellows like Lazarus, lying in the gutter, he told stories about a bleeding woman made whole, a hated Samaritan being a good neighbor, a Syro- Phoenician woman being just as worthy as the children of Israel.**

**He tells us over and over again to see one another with love, without judgment, and more than that to see those whom polite society says are untouchable or unworthy or invisible and see them with the eyes of compassion and mercy and then DO something. Respond Jesus says--- and respond with love.**

**Jesus offers us the opportunity to overhear this heated conversation with the religious authorities. He puts us in the position of "the brothers" the rich man was concerned about.**

**We hear clearly that all God wants us to know and do in this life has already been spoken. Love God and love your neighbor—on this hang**

**all the law and the prophets.**

**The task for us is to learn to see all kinds of people as neighbors, especially those we don't want ruining our property values, or making us feel uncomfortable with their suffering.**

**Sometimes it is true---we don't know what to do or where to go in times of overwhelming suffering or social unrest. And that is what over and over Jesus simply says, "Follow me." Follow me into those places you fear to go, and follow me into a life where the one who dies after having spent the most love has lived the best life of all. Amen.**