

## Gospel

Luke 16:19-31

Jesus said, "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 graduated from college in Annapolis, I decided to stay in the city and continue to be a part of St. Anne's Episcopal Church. I lived in a ramshackle apartment just beyond the borders of upper crust Annapolis; it was student housing rented out by slumlords. I got several jobs to make ends meet and I discovered that I could survive in the "real world." I made a dear friend at St. Anne's, her name was Shirley McFadden. Shirley was chair of the altar guild and a master of needlework. She was old enough to be my grandmother, but we shared a kindred spirit and became fast friends. Shirley and her husband Weems lived right in downtown Annapolis in a house they bought before Annapolis became unaffordable. Shirley and I would often walk all around Annapolis, from her house, to the parish hall, to the church, to get some lunch, to visit someone. As we walked, every time we saw someone, she would say hello to him or her by name. I figured that Shirley and Weems had lived in Annapolis for so long, that they knew everyone by name. Then one day we walked past a man who was clearly homeless. Shirley said, "Hello William, tell me something good today." I was startled that Shirley knew his name. I stood there and watched as she listened to him, asked him a few more questions and then they shook hands and we were off again. It happened a few more times before I was compelled to ask Shirley why she knew these homeless people by name.

"Oh, well they're my neighbors." she said and grinned at me. "And I think that being homeless must make you feel anonymous, no home - no name. So, every time someone asks me for money, I ask for their name."

Shirley was amazing at helping everyone know that they are important. From the homeless person on the street, to the child in church, to the young adult who was trying to figure her life out, Shirley knew us all by name and gave us a great gift by caring for each of us. She filled in the great chasms that are dug between people who live very different lives. I think she filled in the chasm with her faith and her belief that Christ really did want her to love people without distinction, the way Christ loves us all. She was serious about that. And if you acted too

big for your britches, I watched her take the starch out of a few people as well – in a loving way, of course.

The parable that Jesus shares with us this morning is full of great big chasms, the impassable divide between the rich and the poor, between heaven and hell, between those who listen and those who are deaf to the word of God. Jesus' parable is full of extremes. There is a very rich man: he wears purple, he eats sumptuously every day, has an impressive gate at the entrance of his property. And there is a very poor man: he is homeless, lays outside the gate of the rich man's house, he is covered in sores which the dogs come and lick, he would be grateful even to eat the garbage from the rich man's table. Interestingly, the poor man gets a name, Lazarus. He is the only character in Jesus' parables who ever receives a name.

Both men, rich and poor, are mortal and so they both die. Lazarus is carried up by angels to rest in the bosom of Abraham. The rich man goes to Hades and is tormented. He can see heaven from his seat in hell and so he calls out to 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." Here is where the parable gets really interesting. The rich man knows the name of the poor man, covered in sores, who has been begging outside the gate of his home. He knows Lazarus' name and never did a thing to try to help him while they were both alive. And then, if that weren't bad enough, the rich man asks for Lazarus' help to end his torment. All those years that Lazarus was lying in torment right outside his gate and the rich man could not even share table scraps with him. But now that the rich man is lying in torment, he wants Lazarus to come and quench his thirst. Even in Hades, the rich man cannot see things any differently than he did in life. He still believes that his needs and comfort are the most important things to attend to.

Abraham responds to the rich man in a loving but firm manner. He calls the rich man, "Child," acknowledging him as a son of Abraham. He explains that the rich man has already received his reward in life and now it is Lazarus' turn to be comforted. He also explains there is a chasm set up between heaven and hell. Interestingly, he says that the chasm is not just to keep people from Hades out of heaven. But rather, the chasm is built to keep people in heaven from traveling to Hades. It makes me wonder if Lazarus, resting in the arms of Abraham, experiencing heavenly love and care, would want to travel to Hades to help out the rich man who never cared a whit for him. The more I thought about it, the more it made sense that exactly the kind of people who go to heaven would be the people who would make mission trips to visit Hell. Shirley and Lazarus would be spending their heavenly days walking around in Hell learning the names and stories of every person down there.

When the rich man discovers that Lazarus cannot come to him, he asks for Lazarus to be sent to his brothers to warn them. So, it seems that the rich man does care for someone other than himself, he cares about his brothers. This might redeem him a bit if he weren't still ordering Lazarus around from beyond the grave. Father Abraham assures the rich man that if his brothers have not listened to the Torah and the prophets they will not listen to Lazarus, even if he is raised from the dead. The brothers have already decided that they are above the word of God spoken through Moses, they are not going to stoop to listen to the word of God from a poor man, with sores, named Lazarus who is raised from the dead.

At these last words of the story, we are supposed to be reminded of Jesus, a poor man, resurrected from death, with sores on his hands and feet and side. It is one of those moments in Luke's gospel that he deftly draws together the end of the story and the unfolding middle of Jesus' life in one turn of phrase. Will anyone listen to Jesus when he is raised from death? Or

will we all be so accustomed to ignoring the word of God that we will brush him aside and not even bother to learn his name and hear his message?

The end of the parable paints a bleak picture for the rich man and his brothers, and for us. We are always in danger of stepping over someone in need because we are too afraid to call Lazarus our friend and get to know him, or too anxious about maintaining the lifestyle we have established. We need Lazarus to come back from the dead and shake us up a bit, get us to change our lives. And here is the point of the parable for us because we know how the Gospel ends. God *does* send Jesus back from the dead to shake us up and change our lives. The chasms in this world and the next do not exist when we learn the name of Jesus and follow in his footsteps. God *does* believe that we can be transformed by the presence of the risen one, the Holy one, the Son of God.

In the parable, Father Abraham is describing a fixed world where chasms cannot be crossed and people cannot change. In the Gospel, Jesus is proclaiming a world where chasms are bridged with his love, the gates of death are destroyed by his death, and everyone is transformed to love their neighbor whoever he or she may be. God's mercy is not stingy, it is overflowing. Through his only son, God encourages us to learn each other's names, hear each other's stories, and discover that with Christ's love, the chasms between us are filled in and our lives are knit together into the Body of Christ. We will listen to the risen one, who comes back from death to show us that there is no chasm too wide for God's mercy and love.

Open your hymnals to page 470 and let us read together...

**There's a wideness in God's mercy  
like the wideness of the sea;  
there's a kindness in his justice,  
which is more than liberty.  
There is welcome for the sinner,  
and more graces for the good;  
there is mercy with the Savior;  
there is healing in his blood.**

**There is no place where earth's sorrows  
are more felt than in heaven;  
there is no place where earth's failings  
have such kind judgment given.  
There is plentiful redemption  
in the blood that has been shed;  
there is joy for all the members  
in the sorrows of the Head.**

**For the love of God is broader  
than the measure of man's mind;  
and the heart of the Eternal  
is most wonderfully kind.  
If our love were but more faithful,  
we should take him at his word;  
and our life would be thanksgiving  
for the goodness of the Lord.**

**Amen.**