

“Different Worlds”

Luke 16: 19-31

We pick back up with the Gospel of Luke after a few weeks away. In this text, once again, we come across a parable. And as we may remember, parables are designed to challenge our assumptions. They take things that are familiar and turn them around so that we as readers, as people of faith, we are invited to see things differently, to see things not as they are but as they could be. This parable, the one about the rich man and Lazarus, does all that and more.

I say this because it is not just a regular parable. It is an apocalyptic parable which basically means it “serves as a wake-up call, pulling back the curtain to open our eyes to something we urgently need to see before it is too late”...let me say that again: “Pulling back the curtain to open our eyes to something we urgently need to see before it is too late, sort of like the videos from Tulsa and Charlotte did for us again this past week.

Just like the parable between the rich man and Lazarus, the videos of the killings of two black man serve as our wake up call. The conversations that surround these killings serve as our wake up call. They are pulling back the curtain, begging us to see the great chasm that divides us, that separates us, that prevents us from answering the question, “Do all lives really matter or is it just the

lives of those who think like us, who act like us that do? Do all lives really matter or is it just the lives of the ones who look like us that do? The stories from this past week are begging us to see the great chasm that divides our nation, that divides our communities into several very different worlds. The stories from this past week are begging us to see the great chasm of brokenness that is splintering our world into piece before it is too late.

I think it is safe to say that as people of faith, we can no longer pretend that a great chasm in our country doesn't exist. We can no longer pretend the 1960's solved all the race problems in our country. We can no longer pretend we don't know the great divide is there even though we are confronted with it more and more each day.

As people of faith, we can no longer pretend that the story of race, the story of separation and violence, the story of hurt and hate is someone else's story and is not our story as well.

I hesitated to bring this up today especially when I feel so inadequate to discuss it. I don't know what it is like to fear for my life at a traffic stop all because of the color of my skin. I don't know what it is like to be a police officer who wants to serve my community but is only seen as the enemy all because of the badge I wear on my chest.

I don't know what it is like to live in a community confronted with its issues and problems on live TV with the media swooping in, making quick judgement calls based on five minutes of video, feeding its own assumptions, pushing its own agenda so that it will get high ratings for its coverage all the while ignoring the community's real need for authentic conversation, all the while ignoring the community's real need for healing to happen for all parties involved. I don't know what any of that is like....

But I do know what it feels like to be so helpless as I watched scene after scene of anger boiling over, scene after scene of hate splintering a community, scene after scene of watching the great chasm growing wider and wider each and every day, with little hope of reconciliation ever happening.

Because unfortunately, this has become an all too familiar scene. As one author put it, "As I watched the footage coming out of Tulsa, what I saw failed to shock me...I thought this is normal. There's nothing to see here. Get back to [our routine]. The author then goes on to say, "But of course, I was wrong. There is so much that needs to be seen here. There is so much that needs to be heard here. There is so much [work for compassion and love] to which we need to turn to here].

And so in times such as these, when the darkness feels like it is becoming too much, I am reminded that there is so much work, work of love, work of

compassion, work of healing and reconciliation, to which we have been called to do as people of faith. Like the brothers and sisters of the rich man in our story today, we have the words of the prophets. We have the words of Abraham. We even have the words of one who did come back from the dead to show us the way, to show us how to be a voice for the voiceless, to show us how to bridge the great divide by extending an invitation for all to come to the Table of compassion, how to bridge the great divide by throwing open the Gate of New Life. We have the example of the very one who invited us to the Table, the example of the very one who opened the Gate, a Table and Gate that invites, that enables God's Kingdom to be here on Earth as it is in Heaven.

For at time such as this, this is where I turn. This is where I hope. This is where I invite our conversations about race, about the rich man and Lazarus, this is where I invite our conversations about the great divide that separates us into several different worlds to really begin. I invited us to a place where we are grounded and reminded of God's love: The Table of Welcome. I invite us to a place where we are reminded that nothing, not even the deepest brokenness this world can throw at us, nothing can separate us from the grace of God...a Gate that invites us to experience New Life. This morning, I invite us to a sanctuary where we are surrounded by the presence of God and once again, we hear the words, we

say the words of the Lord's Prayer..."Thy will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven".

Because you see, the rich man's sin was not that he had money. His sin was that he ignored Lazarus and his needs. His sin was that he failed to really see Lazarus as a person, as a child of God, as someone made in the image of God, named and claimed as one of God's own. The rich man's sin was that he failed to see what was there right before his very eyes...a human being, hurt and disregarded, a human being, ignored and pushed aside, a human being, suffering in this life.

The rich man failed to see the great chasm in this world, and in doing so, for him, in death, the great chasm remained. Although he longed to be with Father Abraham, he could not cross. He could not bridge the ugliness and separation that surrounded him in death, very much like Lazarus was unable to do in life.

Two men...separated by a Table and a Gate...a table and a gate that the rich man was determined to keep closed, making them only available for his friends, making them only available to the ones he liked, making them only available to and for the ones who thought like him, acted like him, making them only available to and for the ones who looked like him.

In our text today, we have two men, that while on earth, they lived very different lives, never interacting, never speaking, never experiencing the Kingdom

of God in their midst. And so it was in Heaven as it was on Earth, at least for the rich man.

In our text today, we have the story of two men, separated by a table and a gate, separated by a great chasm that grew wider every day, separated by the failure of one person to see what was in front of his very eyes...the possibility of it being on Earth as it is in Heaven, a place full of healing, a place full of hope, a place full of grace, on Earth as it is in Heaven, a place full of love which knows no boundaries.

“In No Future without Forgiveness, Desmond Tutu defines Ubuntu in the following manner: “Ubuntu [...] speaks of the very essence of being human. [We] say... ‘Hey, so-and-so has ubuntu.’ Then you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate. You share what you have. It is to say, ‘My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours.’ We belong in a bundle of life. We say, ‘A person is a person through other persons.’....A person with ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are.

Ubuntu reflects the grace of interdependence in which we recognize that our lives are completely dependent on others...The tragedy of the story is that the wealthy man had the resources, [financially, spiritually and communally] to uplift his “neighbor” but was closed off and uncaring. Perhaps, he saw his wealth as a matter of entitlement and effort and the poverty of the beggar as a matter of personal laziness or lack of initiative. [The rich man’s] failure to see and hear, to empathize, created a gulf in this life that echoed into eternity.

This very prophetic parable, reflective of the prophets of Israel, [reflective of the one who died and came back to life] reminds us that God is concerned with the details of our lives – our attitudes toward [all of God’s children, the ones who look like us and the ones who don’t, God is concerned with the details of our lives, our words and our actions, but God is especially concerned with the people who we neglect and ignore.]

There is a price to pay for our close-mindedness and neglect. There is a price to pay for our apathy and complacency toward others’ pain and destitution: while...the price [may not be eternal damnation like it was for the rich man, because after all, there is such a thing as grace, but that is a different sermon for a different day], the price [for our neglect, for ignoring the great chasm that separates and divides, that created brokenness in our community, in our nation, in our world, more and more every day is alienation from God’s highest call in our lives. God

called the rich man, [calls us] to a simple spiritual exercise: pause, notice, open, stretch, and respond.

The choice to hear the cries of the [forgotten, the ignored, the displaced, the choice to hear the cries of the ones separated by a great divide happens every minute of every day....It occurs as when we pick up the newspaper or check our news feeds online. It occurs as we pay our bills and respond to the worthy causes that present themselves to us. It occurs in the stewardship of time and talent, that is, will we use our gifts and resources to bring greater or lesser beauty of experience to the world. It occurs as we choose to listen or turn away from the pain and joy of [the people in our lives and in our community].

Our choices open the door for greater or lesser manifestations for God's [Kingdom to be here on Earth as it is in Heaven. Our choices] bring greater or lesser beauty to God's experience of the world. God rejoices or suffers as a result of our moment by moment decisions. Nothing is too large or small for God's consideration. No one is left [behind or ignored] by God nor should anyone be left behind [or ignored] by us as well." (Bruce Epperly)

As I draw to a close, I leave us with the same words that Father Abraham gave to the rich man in response to his plea to send someone to tell his brothers and sisters so that they would not come to this place of torment, Father Abraham simply says, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.'

And I would add, we as people of faith, also have the words of the one who did come back from the dead to show us the way, to show us how to be a voice for the voiceless, to show us how to bridge the great divide by extending an invitation for all to come to the Table of compassion, how to bridge the great divide by throwing open the Gate of New Life, a Table and Gate that invites, that enables God's Kingdom to be here on Earth as it is in Heaven.

May the words of the prophets, the words of Abraham, the words and the example of the very one who died and came back from the dead strengthen us, encourage us, challenge us, push us to bridge that great divide here on Earth so that God's Kingdom will be here just like it is in Heaven. Amen.