

Gates and Chasms

Luke 16: 19-31

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March 26, 2017

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I can't tell you how many times I drove past and never saw him. Not that I would have ever remembered. In the almost 12 years when I practiced law in Houston, I always lived west of downtown. That meant there were about three ways to get to the office and you needed to know all of them because traffic mishaps would mean you would need them. The one I traveled the least was a surface street called West Gray. Still, by the mid-90s I'm sure I had driven down that street 100 times and I never saw him. Not that I would have remembered.

The house was not striking. It was old, run down, a converted large single-family home with four mailboxes out front. It was one of many conversions into tiny apartments in the area. The yard, what there was of it, was overgrown and the steps leading to the front door leaned a bit — again, not uncommon in that neighborhood.

I first really saw that house and one of its residents in the summer of one of those years in the mid-90s. His apartment was on the ground floor, just inside the front door, actually. It consisted of one room — likely the former living room or parlor of the house — with an adjacent closet and a bathroom. There was no kitchen but a microwave in the corner. The room was dominated by three pieces of furniture, a hospital bed, a recliner and a wheelchair, and all had seen better days. Daniel — that's what we'll call him today anyway — Daniel was a man not much older than I am right now. His diabetes, emphysema and various heart maladies had made him an invalid at an early age. Daniel was one of the people I met delivering Meals on Wheels for St. Philip Presbyterian Church in Houston. We weren't a regular delivery crew; we were a respite crew. We delivered on fifth Saturdays and, from time to time, filled in for other groups who needed a Saturday off. Over the years, I was in Daniel's home only five or six times. But he made quite the impression.

Life had not been kind to Daniel and he had made his share of mistakes as well. And now he lived on Medicare disability and had a visiting aide who came daily to help get him out of bed and deal with his morning routine. He would normally sit in the wheel chair rather than the recliner, which could get kind of warm in the middle of the day. But the wheel chair could be placed right in front of the window so he could see all of the people pass by.

I don't know how many times he saw my green Lexus zip passed his house without me even noticing he was there. But he knew all of the cars of the teams that brought him his meals and he was usually waving in the window when we walked up those crooked steps.

Walking up those steps wasn't just bringing a meal and some company to Daniel, as I would learn after a few months. It was bridging a chasm that was all too real for me, the young professional on a mission to succeed. And it is all too real for us today.

Today's parable from Jesus is all about chasms — chasms and gates. This is the second parable in chapter 16 of Luke that opens with the words "There was a rich man." The first one is about a steward who cheats his wealthy master and gets praised for it, as Jesus seems to say — if you are going to play the game of this world, do what you can to get yours but realize that this world ends in death and he who dies with the most toys doesn't win. Given that cheery prologue, Luke's listeners and readers likely wince a bit when they hear those words repeated again here. And what shocking parallels Luke and Jesus give us with the rich man and Lazarus.

One is robed in purple cloth, the most expensive there is. It is made from a gland found in mollusks in the Mediterranean, very rare and costly. The other is robed in the purple sores and boils of disease. One feasts daily. That word, "feasts" — remember that extra special feast the father gave for the prodigal in the parable last week? Luke's word choice tells us this rich man ate like that every day and Lazarus couldn't even get scraps.

The rich man steps over Lazarus every day at his gate. As the Greek tells us, Lazarus was thrown every day like a penny saver and just as easily ignored. They are so physically close every day but there is a gate keeping them apart. And then, they die. (Jesus' listeners lean forward because they've heard these "two men die" parables before from other teachers.) And the men are in Hades. That's right — though one is taken by angels and the rich man dies and is just buried — they are both in the land of the dead. (That's worth clearing up here. This isn't a lesson about heaven and hell. Hades is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word "Sheol" where all go when they die.) But in the land of the dead, Lazarus stands with Abraham on high and the rich man, though he can see Lazarus, is separated by flames that torment him.

The Gate the rich man created is gone but the chasm still exists. And what does the rich man do? Does he cry out for forgiveness? No. He casts his eyes upon Abraham and Lazarus. And, to whom does he speak? To Abraham. And what does he ask? For Abraham to send Lazarus to help him. He does not speak to Lazarus, or apologize to him; he does not take responsibility for the pain he has caused, or the chasm he has created. He only expresses remorse for its consequences to HIM. He is still concerned only with his own torment and the possible torment of his own family. He still cannot see Lazarus as the one who needed him, who deserved his aid. He only sees him as one who should be his servant/messenger.

The chasm, that Jesus has Abraham speak of, was created in life by the rich man's blindness to Lazarus and his need. Yes, but there is more than that. Even when Lazarus isn't in need, the rich man sees him only as a means, a means to help to quench his thirst, a means of making the rich man feel better by warning his family of the errors of

his ways. The chasm is still fixed in this mythical afterlife because for the rich man, Lazarus is still the other.

I've been re-reading a book these last few weeks entitled *Homegrown Democrat*. It's a book that Garrison Keillor wrote in the middle of the George W. Bush administration. And one that gives what, for to both political parties, is — for lack of a better phrase — a Midwestern ex-Lutheran political memoir. And it is as challenging and clever as you'd expect from the father of *Prairie Home Companion* and the man who once said "Anyone who thinks sitting in church can make you a Christian must also think that sitting in a garage can make you a car."

But it says something very powerful to us in the midst of our divided nation. In the book, Keillor laments what he sees as one of the great losses of the last 40 years in the United States — the loss of the idea that we are all in this together — and that a central part of that idea is that those who are blessed are blessed to be a blessing to all. Keillor recalls a day, not the good old days but the challenging days, when people like Lyndon Johnson and Hubert Humphrey looked around at the fate of the poor here and around the world, and of the victims of racial prejudice and said we can respond; we can use the benefits of our science and our wealth to lift the poorest, to protect the weakest. We can see those who have been tossed down at our doorstep and instead of asking where they came from, we see them as one of us.

At the good heart of programs like the War on Poverty, we could see not just the need but we could see that those in need were not the other, they were one of us.

We don't need to ask if there are gates and chasms before us. The recent short form budget proposal prepared by the current administration in Washington, among other things, eliminates the over \$150 million dollars in utilities assistance that keeps thousands of Chicagoans from freezing to death in their homes if they can't afford to pay for it. It slashes funding for after-school programs, including one providing three safe hours of homework assistance, health training and a meal to over 1000 students in the Chicago Public Schools every school day. It eliminates a program in the State Department that fed 41 million people around the globe last year who were caught in the middle of war, famine, draught and conflict. And yes, as reported in some news outlets, it cuts out Community Development Block grants which provide a very small part of the funding for Meals on Wheels in some cities. And it proposes unspecified cuts to the budget of the Department of Health and Human Services, which provides about 35 percent of Meals on Wheels' funding nationally.

I mention these not to take a swipe at the current administration; they are but a reflection of that chasm that Garrison Keillor saw growing years ago.

But so what, Michael, where is the good news here? Why bring all of this up? Just to make us feel bad because we can't fix it by ourselves? So what are we to do?

First, I want us to see that we are already doing great things to tear down gates of privilege and to bridge gaps — from preparing meals, to volunteering at the winter shelter to opening our church to Family Promise. And one of the most obvious gap-bridging things we do is ASP, not only helping to make homes warmer, dryer and safer for many folks who don't live all that differently than Daniel did in Houston, but by meeting people where they are — learning about their lives, seeing them and respecting them.

You see it's not just what we do; it's how and why we do it. Daniel didn't just get food from those teams from St. Philip — he was seen; he was noticed; he was acknowledged in a way the rich man never could acknowledge Lazarus. And those teams taught me to see Daniel; they taught me that being loved and forgiven and blessed was a calling to go and love and see and care. And we can see where that got me....

But thereafter, every time I drove down West Gray, I saw the house and I always looked for him. And sometimes I saw Daniel carried out with his chair in the yard or sitting at that window. And even now, when I'm in that part of Houston, I still look for that house and for Daniel, though they are both long gone.

It wasn't just that the rich man wouldn't feed Lazarus; it's that he wouldn't see him — not in a way that acknowledged his dignity and worth and belovedness. It's not just that we are potentially cutting food programs and after-school programs and heating programs, it's that somewhere along the way, the powers that be who speak of "results" from this spending have forgotten that life is the result, dignity is the result of being known and seen.

The call of today's text, the call that Christ issued that day on the hillside, the call to the church, to this church today is to look around — in this place and in this neighborhood and at the homes across McCormick and in Rogers Park and Chicago and around the world — and to see the need that is there and do what we can to meet it. But it's also to cross the chasms, the chasms of race, gender, nationality, disease, social stigma, economic status, sexual orientation, educational status, and even religion. Why? Because someone first crossed that chasm to see us, to meet our needs, to be our savior. And because we have been loved — because we have been welcomed, because we have been not just seen but acknowledged by one another and our loving God, because we know what it's like to go from being OTHER to being one of an "us" — let us be willing to trade gates and chasms for relationships. Surely that is walking in his ways. Amen.