**“Chasms in the Heart”**

A sermon by The Rev. Christopher Wendell

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My preaching class in seminary was titled “Teaching and Preaching Texts of Terror”. It was a popular seminar because the content was specific to each individual student. During the first week, we each selected particular passages from the Bible that most terrified us personally, and explored hem more fully as we prepared to either preach or teach about them to the rest of the class.

Today’s Gospel wasn’t one of my texts…but that’s only because I don’t think I’d come across it yet. To me, this passage is one of the most terrifying in the entire Bible – though perhaps not for the reason you might think. I don’t believe in divine vengeance or retribution. I don’t really believe in hell – at least in the kind of hell depicted in this passage, the one of flames and torment and torture. I don’t fear eternal punishment…though, some people might think I should!

To me the scariest part of the passage isn’t the portent of an uncomfortably warm eternity. Rather, it’s this:

“Between you and us,” says Abraham to the Rich Man, as he clutches the silent Lazarus in his chest, “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.” To me this, the great chasm between poor Lazarus and the Rich man, is the scariest part: the sense that there might in fact be an unbridgeable gulf between two people in the same neighborhood because one is poor, needy and homeless and the other is rich, well-fed and comfortable. What terrifies me is that the circumstances of two people’s lives might be so different, so foreign to each other, that they can no longer be neighborly to each other, no longer even acknowledge the dignity they share as human beings. I’m afraid of this “great chasm” far more than the possibility of hell because, unlike the fiery torment, I know with certainty that the great chasm is absolutely real.

In the story, of course, Abraham is speaking metaphorically. But that doesn’t mean he’s not talking about reality. Lazarus and the rich man lived within eyesight of each other; they were physically proximate, bounded together by simple geography. Neighbors: put together not by choice, but by circumstance. Now, we don’t have any sense of who was there first. Did the Rich Man buy up the land on which Lazarus had built a makeshift shelter? Did Lazarus just start squatting at the rich man’s gate one day, and never leave? Regardless of who got there first – they shared the same space.

But that was about all they shared. The Rich Man, we are told wore fine cloths and ate very well. He lived in a house with a gate, giving him the ability to live his life of affluence with as much privacy as he desired. Lazarus’ poverty, like most poverty, was entirely public. He lacked any private space, unable even to keep the sores of his skin from public view – let alone his hunger and chill. Same neighborhood, very different lives.

In fact, they shared one thing more, too. They both died prematurely. We don’t know why Lazarus died. Perhaps he froze. Perhaps he starved. Perhaps his sores became infected. And no one cared to give him anything.

We also don’t know why the rich man died early. One commentator suggests, perhaps he had gorged himself too often and developed an arterial blockage, or some other disease. Perhaps, he speculates, the food that killed the rich man could have saved Lazarus.

In the Gospel’s account of their relationship, there is no report of any direct conversation. No report of any interaction, any offering of or asking for help, any acknowledgement of suffering. Of course, the lack of direct interaction doesn’t mean the two didn’t know about each other. And it doesn’t mean they never thought about each other or developed opinions about each other. But it is clear they didn’t really know much about each other, despite living next to each other.

We can easily see how this lack of direct interaction, this great chasm among physical neighbors, caused Lazarus great suffering. But harder to see at first, is how the great chasm causes the *rich man* great suffering. He certainly is unaware of his own suffering from not knowing his neighbor.

In the second half of the parable, he becomes all too aware. Jesus uses this part of the parable to try and convince us, that the great chasm causes suffering not just for Lazarus, but also for the rich man. And, in fact, Jesus attempts to convince us that Lazarus’ suffering is only temporary, restricted only to the physical realm, while the rich man’s suffering is more permanent, because it touches the spiritual realm of his being. I think this is why Jesus describes the rich man as “in agony”. All of a sudden the great chasm that seemed like no big deal, his alienation from and condescension towards his destitute neighbor becomes a hole in his soul. He realizes his own incompleteness in a way he never fully realized while he was alive.

We shouldn’t let our post-modern rejection of the imagery of eternal fire and flames cause us to miss Jesus’ main point here. The Rich Man didn’t appear to be suffering outwardly, but his soul was empty. His ability to love his fellow human beings, to be moved by their suffering and challenges was blocked by his own excessive self-centerdness. Even after he becomes aware of the agony he is in, you can still see his closed mindedness, the egoism, the desire to put his own needs first. “Send Lazarus to help me” he requests. “Send Lazarus to my brothers.” “Send Lazarus” as if, in the words of the same commentator as before, Lazarus’ existence was supposed to be for the rich man’s benefit and convenience. Even in death, the rich man feels entitled to move Lazarus around for his family’s own benefit and convenience.

But here is what is most frightening to me about the whole story: the possibility that, really, it’s just too late to reverse the damage. There comes a point, Jesus seems to be saying, of no return. When the chasm is too great to be crossed. When it becomes fixed. Permanently.

I don’t know about you, but I worry about this almost every day. Almost every day I worry about the way in which the great chasms that separate us from our neighbors, chosen and unchosen, are becoming more and more fixed. I worry about how, each day, our own needs take up more and more of our mental space: “How’s this working out for me and my brother, my children, my people.” I worry that more and more, the concern for self over others, the desire to divide the world into us and them, rich and poor, white and dark, American and other – that it all creates chasms that are firmly, firmly fixed between people whom God has brought together to be neighbors.

I don’t want to live in that kind of world. And I’m pretty confident that God doesn’t want us to live in it either. Now, I’m a realist. There will always be chasms of some kind or another. People are different, and those differences at times create distinctions. People live different kinds of lives, with different customs, cultures, norms, and levels of comfort. But when those chasms become fixed, unable to be crossed; when we lose the ability or desire to empathize with neighbors of ours who are different in some way; when it becomes acceptable to ignore entirely the needs of those literally at our doorsteps; then our souls are in real peril.

You know, these past few weeks there have been intense discussions in various corners of town about the families living in the Plaza Hotel. A few people see their presence as a problem, and of course, there are some challenges. But I see this situation as a gift from God – as a chance to reach across some of the great chasms in this world, a chance to engage a new set of neighbors across dimensions of difference that many of us rarely cross by choice. The displaced families living their temporarily need a safe, welcoming community in which to live while they plan their critical next steps. Our souls need relationships that bridge the great chasms of society to remind us of our shared humanity. We are all in need. Together, we have an opportunity to meet each other’s needs. To turn away from that encounter, to call it wrong, to fear it -- is to turn closer towards a world where differences of race and class will forever separate and segregate. It is to turn away from neighbors God has given us. And it is to turn away from the Gospel.

Because at the heart of the Gospel is God’s choice, in Jesus Christ, to cross over the greatest chasm of all. To journey from the farthest depths of the universe, from the limitless space and time of the divine into our own finite reality, our own flesh and blood, our very humanity. God crossed the greatest chasm of all, the one no one thought could ever be crossed, and became human – so that each of us could cross back the other way, and become divine. May God help us to help each other rise to the spirit of divine compassion, generosity and love, that is always within us.

Amen.