

Steering Around Life's Potholes: Keeping a Comfortable Distance
Luke 16:19-31 (Second Sunday in Lent – March 8, 2009)

Probably no parable of Jesus is more like to be wrongly interpreted, distorted, or misapprehended than this one. Maybe it happened for some of you just now; that is, what you thought you heard was the well-to-do man being damned for having been wealthy in life, while it seemed that Lazarus, on the other hand, was being commended and rewarded for nothing more than having been poor and miserable. It's a common impression of this parable, but isn't really what is there.

It doesn't say, for example, that Lazarus was a saint-in-rags who had a heart of gold, or that his bad health, for example, was because he had worn himself out caring for others, or that his generosity had made him poor, causing him to give away all that he had. Nor, for that matter, does it imply that the rich man's wealth came from evil sources: from illegal insider trading on camel futures or from manufacturing shoddy or unsafe sandals or from extortion or from selling opium at the high school.

All it really does say is that the rich man was financially secure, very pleasant, and comfortable. He dressed, it says, in the finest fabrics and he ate very well. His home was apparently fenced or walled in, since the parable mentions that it had a gate. It doesn't, however, say that all that was evil. No, his being an able man of good taste (being one who appreciated a good cut of beef or the right vintage of wine), being a man who could dress well, decorate well, and landscape well, wasn't the issue. A person could certainly be and do all of that without being un-Godly, stingy, mean-spirited, or unscrupulous.

In fact, couldn't one just as easily conjecture that Lazarus' life would have been even more miserable had the rich man made certain that his cook put leftovers out by the gate for Lazarus to eat? It is conceivable that the coat with which Lazarus covered himself may have been one that the rich man had given to the Volunteers of Israel Clothes Closet. The man's annual contribution to the Nazareth United Jewish Appeal probably helped fund services which, even if unused by Lazarus, could have helped him and may have helped others of his ilk.

And while we're still conjecturing, it's also conceivable that Lazarus may in some way have brought his poverty upon himself by squandering good opportunities, for example, or from lack of motivation, or because of an earlier alcohol problem, or just from being undisciplined. We just don't know any of that, one way or the other. No, Jesus was very careful, in creating this story, not to give any information that might help you or me deflect his point by making

either the rich man or Lazarus sound so extreme that they had nothing to do with us or to matters pertaining to our lives.

We come, then, to the second act of the parable. Both men have died and, for reasons which we aren't told, Lazarus ends up with Abraham (considered a good place to be). The rich man, on the other hand, was way off in the distance in a kind of torment. Some part of his torment had to have been his shock -- his incredulity at the way things worked out. Maybe he hadn't been perfect (who is?), but he certainly hadn't been deprived either. So, he makes what seems like a very reasonable request. "Father Abraham," he pleads, "...send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue." Note that he even asked for Lazarus by name. Though they had been from very different parts of society, to the rich man's credit, he did know who Lazarus was. That is, Lazarus wasn't only a nameless, faceless social problem.

Moreover, the rich man must have felt that, at least indirectly, he had done enough for Lazarus back in life, that it was reasonable to ask for a return favor -- a minor comforting gesture. (I would have thought so too, wouldn't you?) "Have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue..."

Now we get to the real meat of the parable. Abraham doesn't claim that the rich man's request is brazen or inappropriate. His words to him are not at all taunting. In fact, he sounds compassionate. In a matter-of-fact way, he says: "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..." THAT, my friends, is what this story is about. It's not about the nature of any heaven or hell, or about what good deeds or which stupidities might land someone in either place. No, it's about creating chasms, about carefully keeping distance, and about comfortable remoteness.

And here is where the matter of the rich man's wealth and/or position and/or power -- while not THE direct cause -- do come into play. Apparently, in his case, they did have something to do with the chasm. For as we know, while there are many things that money cannot buy (things like love, respect, serenity, joy), unfortunately, one thing that money often can purchase, and too often does, is distance.

Whether for the rich man or you or me, one of the options that is always there, once a person has some financial resources and personal power, is arranging a comfortably oblivious remoteness. That seems to be what happened here. The rich man arranged his life and controlled his exposures so as to be out of any direct touch with ugly human realities or any upsetting misery and struggle (of which Lazarus was a close-at-hand example). It probably

wasn't all that difficult to do it, either. He could set his life up so as to be able to go for weeks, maybe months, without ever actually looking Lazarus in the eye, or anyone like him. Whether it was Lazarus-the-failure, or Lazarus-the-underprivileged, or Lazarus-the-lonely, or Lazarus-the-social-outcast, or Lazarus-the-minority, or Lazarus-the-troubled, or Lazarus-the-abrasive, or some other disconcerting, or maybe disgusting, or possibly depressing Lazarus, the rich man digs a moat around his life, one comfortable shovel-full at a time. Abraham called it a great chasm, this deliberate distance that protected him from "people like that."

It's a subtle thing, but all too real. Moreover, it insidiously becomes far more than only the absence of direct personal contact. It's the separation that then grows in one's mind that becomes the worst of it. Maybe you've noticed how easily it grows. Though it sounds upside down to say it, the greater the distance and the less the contact, the more of an expert the rich man believes himself to be in regard to Lazarus and others whose troubles and problems make one upset or uncomfortable. Stand back and watch sometime, if you haven't already. Those who are most remote, most antiseptically out of direct contact, and who most carefully control what they are exposed to seem to be the ones who are most certain and completely comfortable saying things like: "Lazarus could get out of the mess that his life is if he really wanted to. He likes being a social parasite."

"Lazarus wouldn't appreciate a better situation if he were given one. In six months he'd be right back as he is."

"Lazarus isn't really sick. He's a hypochondriac. He prefers having people feel sorry for him to being well."

"Lazarus' health wouldn't be so awful if he would take care of himself the way you and I do."

"I can't prove it, of course, but I'd be willing to bet that Lazarus really is of very marginal intelligence."

"I know now that I've made a mistake in putting leftovers out for Lazarus. He doesn't need food. He needs to get hungrier so that he'll get motivated."

"I happen to know that not only was Lazarus' mother a beggar, but so was her father. One would have to be crazy to believe that anything will ever change with him."

As the rich man (or Dives in some translations) carefully turns off his own empathy, do you see how the chasm is built? The greater the distance, the more easily come those

generalities, the discounting, and sometimes even derision. Dives may even commend himself on how much clearer, wiser, and more realistic his thinking has become from this distance.

What further muddies and complicates the picture is that some of those analyses of Lazarus may be accurate – at least to some extent. There is a good chance that Lazarus DOES have some real problems. Even so, what Dives failed to understand is that when such conclusions about someone's problems, mistakes, or predicaments are made by someone from the safety of the other side of the chasm, it's not really information on Lazarus. NO, it's very grim information on the person doing the talking – information on what deadly thing Dives has allowed to happen to his own soul. The underlying function of those glib generalizations, party lines, social clichés, and pontifications of the elite is to create the distance that protects the mind and emotions from what might otherwise interfere with one's self-interest, comfort, and insular way of looking at life.

And let there be no mistake about this: chasm-building isn't only the problem of the wealthy. Wealth obviously can make it easier to do, but it's an option and a temptation to a lot of us. What makes it alluring is that it promises simplicity and a way to emotional tranquility in the face of the very upsetting kinds of struggle and passion and injustice with which our world is unfortunately infected. But it exacts a terrible price! C.S. Lewis caught the principle magnificently, as it had to do with loving (which is, of course, one component of this). He wrote: "To care at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and with little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket of your self-interest. But in that casket -- safe, dark, motionless, airless – it will change. It will not be broken. It will become unbreakable, impenetrable, and irredeemable. The alternative to the risk of complication and even tragedy is damnation. The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love, is Hell."

Exactly! That's what makes this really a tough little parable — a disturbing one. What that isolated, spiritually dwarfed, tormented character, Dives, ends up revealing is that what we don't know CAN and DOES hurt us. What we manage to keep from letting ourselves feel definitely DAMAGES us. Insulating ourselves from depressing aspects of humanity erodes OUR humanity. In short, the very chasm that we put there to protect us and to keep things nice turns out to be the grave where the image of God within us gets buried.

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“What if we are not aware that we are doing it?” is the remaining question. At the end of the parable, Dives is protesting that he never had a chance to know any better. But Abraham says, in effect, “Uh uh. Not true. You had every opportunity to know better.” He’s right, of course. We’re all intelligent enough to catch ourselves if we want to, parroting generalizations about people of whom we have no personal experience, but have only heard about from professional chasm builders. Everyone of us is insightful enough to recognize that we (in most cases), never having been homeless or never having been without adequate food or never having been chronically ill and unable to get decent health care or never having been on the short end of bigotry, are on dangerous ground when we philosophize and pontificate on what all is wrong with those who have ended up stuck in those kinds of misery and deprivation. Yet, at some level we do know what we’re doing when we push from our minds what is unpleasant to know and when we’re contriving not to get close to what could complicate our thinking. We do know! It’s just that staying with our empathy is emotionally expensive. Mercy and forgiveness are often controversial, particularly these days. Allowing oneself to get directly and personally involved is unpredictable and difficult to control. To be one who cares a lot is often to be labeled a “bleeding heart” (particularly by those who have shrunk their own). That’s why it can be so very tempting to buffer ourselves from unpleasantness, to severely limit the scope of our concern, and to intellectualize rather than sympathize. There will probably always be a side of us saying, “In times like these, if a person can afford it and arrange it, WHY NOT keep everything around him just as simple and as undemanding and undisturbing and ‘nice’ as possible. I can’t solve all the world’s problems or make everyone’s pain go away. What’s so bad about buffering my emotions and my morale?”

If I understand correctly this parable about this unfortunate man, Dives, the answer is that those perfectly reasonable, practical chasms are the major way in which you and I are likely to separate ourselves from God.

If you haven’t figured it out, then, this particular parable isn’t told to get more help for Lazarus. It’s for the sake of the rest of us. Apparently, we need to be doing everything we can come up with to stay closely, personally in touch with what life is and what it means for every kind of human being that surrounds us. To fail to do so is to begin to die spiritually.