

“How to Bridge the Compassion Chasm”
Luke 16:19-31
Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost

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Sept. 25, 2016

A couple of summers ago, Anna and I traveled some of our country's most beautiful National Parks, in Utah. Zion National Park was a highlight, and, while there, we embarked on a sixteen-mile hike called “The Narrows.” The Narrows was not a hike where you hike high atop mountain peaks with breathtaking views below.

Quite the opposite: this is a hike through the bottom of a narrow canyon. For sixteen miles, we walked through a river with stone walls, carved out by the river over centuries, reaching several stories high on either side of us.

On this breathtaking hike, there was no climbing up or turning back. We were at the bottom of an enormous chasm, and the only way out was by walking through it.

I was reminded of this hike as I read the parable that Jesus tells in our gospel this morning. I wondered whether the vantage point we shared from the bottom of that canyon was anything like the rich man's after he died. There is no help for him, we are told. He is stuck forever in a self-made kind of hell where there is no climbing up, no way of getting out.

You see, this unnamed rich man had neglected poor Lazarus for years. Lazarus sat in hunger and agony outside the gates of the rich man's mansion, and every single day the rich man would step over Lazarus's body as he came and went. He didn't give Lazarus so much as a coin, a simple greeting, some bandages for his sores. He ignored him. For the rich man, Lazarus's life did not matter.

But the one thing that money could not buy the rich man was immortality. Like Lazarus, like me, like all of you...the rich man was very mortal. And in death, this unnamed rich man found himself suffering in a place without food or water or love. He was in agony, while Lazarus rested eternally with God in the bosom of Abraham.

And it's Abraham that delivers the terrible news to the rich man: “A great chasm has been fixed,” he says, “and no one can cross from there to us.”

Jesus tells this parable not as a way of telling us new information about what the afterlife is like. In fact, addressing the money-loving crowd that has gathered to criticize him, Jesus tells this parable as a present day warning. There is a chasm, and *today*, *now* is the time to go about healing it.

So what is the chasm? Of course, it is the economic chasm between rich and poor. And Jesus talked about this wealth chasm frequently during his ministry. But the reason that our rich man finds himself suffering is that for his whole life he put himself at the bottom of a compassion chasm.

After all, Jesus does not even give him a name. He is identified only by his wealth. And, when wealth or privilege makes up our primary markers of identity, we put ourselves at the bottom of this same chasm. We withhold compassion because we cling so tightly to the things that give us status and privilege in a world where so many around us go on suffering.

It's a compassion chasm. And notice what the rich man begins to do at the bottom of it. Even in his self-made pit of isolation and pain, he still fails to show compassion. Instead, he falls back on the privilege he always possessed in life: he orders Lazarus to bring him a drink. He tries to bargain with Abraham.

Never before had he been without options or resources. His money, his privilege, his power, had always given him choices, provided him with a path out of bad situations. But now he was confronted with a kind of stuck-ness that is known all too well by the chronically poor and ill and marginalized among us.

It's a compassion chasm. And he is at the bottom. And the only thing he can think to do is try and argue himself out of it. What is still missing is compassion for Lazarus and a recognition that Lazarus's life indeed mattered, very much.

And this is why this parable makes me uncomfortable. Because in the news this week was story after story of people left for dead while the rest struggle to have compassion. Terence Crutcher, an unarmed black man in Tulsa, OK., killed by a police officer. And then a few days later Keith Scott in Charlotte. And then there were stories of deplorable terror attacks in St. Cloud and New York, the fear of which caused many to spiral once again into hateful speech about the presence of immigrants and refugees in our communities.

And one way I know that there is a compassion chasm, that I sense it present among us, is that we cannot even raise these issues without feeling as though we're politicizing them. Rather than simply lamenting the death of one of God's own beloved children, we flee immediately into debates about policing and border control. These are fine conversations to have, but not if we have failed to first feel compassion for and with the people whose lives are repeatedly ignored.

What really struck me out of all of the painful stories of the past week were a few words shared by the twin sister of Terence Crutcher. Just before he was killed, a helicopter from above reported that Terence looked like "a big, bad dude." They did not know his name, but, from a helicopter circling hundreds of feet above the ground, they judged by his appearance that he was a "big, bad dude."

"Do you want to know who that big 'bad dude' was?" his sister, Tiffany, asked. "That big 'bad dude' was my twin brother. That big 'bad dude' was a father. That big 'bad dude' was a son. That big 'bad dude' was enrolled at Tulsa Community College, just wanting

to make us proud. That big 'bad dude' loved God; that big 'bad dude' was at church singing, with all his flaws, every week. That's who he was."¹

His life mattered.

Did I mention that the name Lazarus, in Greek, literally means, "God is my help"? This was not a name that Jesus chose at random. And, like Lazarus, this beloved child of God named Terence sang his faith to God each Sunday. Which sounds a lot like what we are doing here, this Sunday and every Sunday.

You see, we share a common identity with Terence and with other victims of persecution and violence: we belong to God. And when we remember this, when we show compassion to those left for dead, the compassion chasm closes. Justice becomes possible.

At the end of the parable, Jesus says something that I hope turns out to be wrong. Recall how, in his bargaining, the rich man pleads with Abraham to send someone from the dead to warn his rich brothers, so they do not befall the same fate. Jesus says, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

Interesting words from Jesus. Considering that, a few days after telling this parable, he would be nailed to a cross and killed while so many looked on and watched. Just as the rich man rejected Lazarus, in Christ we rejected the perfect love of God and we crucified him as we stood at the bottom of a chasm that we could not climb out of.

But then Jesus returned to us from the dead. In the resurrection, Jesus did not come to punish or to judge. Nor did the disciples who abandoned him offer well-reasoned arguments for why his death was justified. They did not say, "If you had just obeyed the authorities, if you had only complied with the law, you wouldn't have died. You brought this on yourself." No. They felt ashamed, and Jesus offered them forgiveness. Reconciliation. He brought them – and all of us – up out of the chasm.

And this is why I hope these closing words of Jesus are wrong. "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." Christ has risen; are we convinced by him? In faith, we have received everything we need. By his death and resurrection, Jesus calls us to be peacemakers and to be reconciled to all people, especially to those without power.

The chasm has been bridged by the cross of Christ, and we must have faith to follow Jesus across it. The path we follow leads out of that deep chasm and into love where we might dwell with Lazarus and Abraham and Terence and all God's people who have died in faith.

¹ <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/09/20/494697359/after-police-killing-of-unarmed-man-tulsa-chief-promises-to-achieve-justice>

We need Jesus. We need each other. And so, with all our flaws, here we are again. And here, there is so much more than a drop of water to cool our tongues – instead, a cup of wine. Hold out your hands and receive again this reconciliation in bread, Christ's own wounded body.

Be pulled out of that compassion chasm. Then go. Look into the eyes of the poor, the powerless, the neglected, the Lazaruses of the world, and tell them your name. Share with them in the common humanity that belongs to each of us as children of a loving God. The chasm has been bridged: will we be courageous enough to get out of it?

Amen.