

## Gulf is Crossed

Scriptures: 1 Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31

**God is Great!**

September has flown by! Leaves are changing – some have fallen off already – and temperatures are cooling down. Autumn has arrived! It's one of my favorite seasons of the year. The Master Artist paints beautiful landscape paintings each morning with sunrises over spectacularly colored foliage. The sound of leaves crunch as you walk outside in the yard, smell the aroma of wood burning on the breeze, and you realize – like Bryan sang to us last week, “O God, how great Thou art!” God is good – He's great – and He gives us His best when He gave us His Son. Almost every time we see Jesus in Scripture, He has a crowd around Him. This morning we're going to look at a parable Jesus told to a crowd, and then we'll talk about it, and how it applies to us even today. If you brought your Bible, or have a Bible app handy, turn with me to Luke 16:19-31. I'll be reading from the New International Version today.

**Read Luke 16:19-31.**

I want to back up to something we heard earlier today, which applies to the Gospel reading. Paul wrote a letter to Timothy, and told him, “People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil,” (1 Tim. 6:9-10a). What does that boil down to? It boils down to greed. To pride. To having things my way. That's our society today, friends.

We live in a society where people are used and thrown away like trash, instead of valued. As Methodists, we have a theology of grace. John Wesley wrote numerous sermons talking about it. So when we say we value people, do we mean that we value them for the things they do? Of course not. If we are only valuing people for what they do, then we're objectifying them – turning them into something instead of someone. On the flip side, when we see our brothers and sisters in Christ doing things unbecoming Christians, we're called to lovingly steer them in the right, Biblical, direction.

Have you ever heard the saying, “you can't judge a book by its cover?” We have to step outside ourselves, and outside what's comfortable, to be God's grace poured out in the world today. There are a lot of people wrestling with sins of a wide variety – and almost all of them have a negative view of themselves – instead of a view that they are the beloved of God. They're so focused on the sin – and oftentimes the Church gets so focused on the sin – that corporately we fail to live into the reality that they've already been set free from sin by the blood of the Lamb! The Church, in general, but in America in particular, needs to do a better job of getting that message out, and as a

local church, so do we. He died to save us, He rose to free us, He intercedes even now in our behalf, and His Spirit dwells within and changes us daily into a new creature!

### **Dismissive Dives and Leprous Lazarus**

Roman Catholic tradition names the rich man in our parable Dives, even though he isn't named in Scripture. Dives is a Latin word that means "rich man." So what we have is a case of dismissive Dives and leprous Lazarus here. Jesus is talking in our Gospel passage today, and He says, "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores," (Luke 16:19-21).

It's apparent that there is a difference in the social and economic status of Lazarus and the rich man. The rich man had everything he could possibly want, while Lazarus didn't. In fact, Lazarus was so bad off, that it sounds like he couldn't even get himself to the rich man's gate on his own – he had to be placed there. We aren't told who lays Lazarus at the gate of the rich man's house. But Lazarus longs to eat the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table. Today we would say that Lazarus is in extreme poverty.

Not only that, but Lazarus was covered with sores, we're told. What illness in Bible times have we heard of where people were covered with sores? Leprosy. It was as dreaded to the ancient world as what HIV/AIDS is in our time. Jesus doesn't say that Lazarus had it, but with the inclusion of the detail about the sores being licked by dogs, do you think other people are going to want to get close to the guy? Probably not.

Let me pause here, and just say, that this Lazarus is not the same Lazarus who was the friend of Jesus. It's not the guy Jesus called out of the tomb after he had been dead for four days. This is a different guy named Lazarus. We know what happens next in the Scripture. The poor beggar dies, and so does the rich man.

### **Wanting but not Giving Pity**

Notice the description Jesus gives regarding this. "The beggar died and the angels carried him off to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side," (verses 22-23). It sounds like Lazarus has finally gotten some relief, right? However, the rich guy is another story! He finds himself in Hades, a borrowed Greek term for the underworld named after the Greek god of the dead – and Jesus tells us that he's "in torment." In our common conversation, we would call it Hell today. It doesn't sound like a very good place to be, does it?

“So the rich man called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire,’” (verse 24). This is very telling. We have people in the Church, broadly speaking, who think that Hades or Hell is just a made up place. Some people think it doesn’t exist. They need to read their Bible, and really listen to what Jesus is saying. He wouldn’t tell us about something which wasn’t a reality! That doesn’t fit His character. God never lies!

The rich man wants pity – even though he never gave it in his life – but look who he calls to and begs pity from. Father Abraham. Can Abraham do anything to help him? No. Even in Hell, the rich guy misses the mark. God – Jesus Christ – is the One to call on when we find ourselves in overwhelming need. The rich man must have missed church on the Sabbath when that was discussed! He even asks Abraham to send Lazarus to him – by name – to sprinkle water on his scorched tongue.

That’s also a very key detail of this story. While they were alive, the rich man couldn’t care less for Lazarus. He won’t even give him the scraps of leftover food from his table. He didn’t give Lazarus the time of day. Now, since the roles are reversed, the rich man wants to be catered to by Lazarus, who is in a better position than he is. Talk about entitlement! The rich man had been catered to his whole life, and even in Hell, is so proud that he thinks he should still be able to call all the shots!

### **We Can’t Bridge the Gulf**

“But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us,’” (verses 25-26). What a wake-up call! The rich man is reminded of his previous status, how Lazarus was ignored, and to add injury to insult, Abraham points out to the guy that a chasm – some other Bible translations say a gulf – is between them which cannot be crossed. When I think about this, I think of the pictures I’ve seen of the Grand Canyon in Arizona, without any of the bridges or barriers which have been put up. Without those railings, most people probably wouldn’t want to stand up close to the edge!

Remember, the rich guy, for whatever reason, still suffers under the burden caused by his pride. Pride is a sin – it’s a character flaw – it’s a sin because it values self over others. And valuing self over others is sin. Jesus tells us in Scripture to love God, and love neighbor. When we do that, we show to the world the character traits of Jesus Christ.

So, since he can’t wheel and deal his way out of Hell, he decides he’ll try another approach, something perhaps more appealing to Abraham than asking him to send

someone over the gulf to wet his tongue. Remember, the rich guy has his pride, and his entitlement mindset intact. It's "owed" to him. But, he tries to be nice about it! "He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment,'" (verses 27-28).

In a way, I can relate with the rich guy in this passage. We want to prevent other people from facing the torment. We want to rescue them. We want to save them. Church, let's get right down to the theological nitty-gritty of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. Do you, or I, or the Church save anybody? Absolutely not! Check out page 880 in the United Methodist Hymnal. That's that red book in front of you in the chairs. I'll give you a minute to flip to it.

"We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through Him all things were made. For us and for our salvation He came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human."<sup>1</sup>

There is only one Savior of humanity, Jesus Christ. Look at the next page, 881. "I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son our Lord: Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, He suffered, under Pontius Pilate He was crucified, died, and was buried; He descended to the dead."<sup>2</sup> This is the core of who we are as Christians. These are our fundamental beliefs – and they've been the same since the Church began. Jesus Christ is the only One capable of saving us, saving the world – He's living, breathing Perfection – He's God, wrapped in human flesh.

## **Queen Elizabeth II**

What depth of love must Almighty God have for us, that He would condescend Himself so much to put His own skin into our game? A couple weeks ago – you may have seen this on television or social media – Queen Elizabeth II died at the age of 96. She had been Queen of Great Britain and the other Commonwealth Realms for 70 years. People came out of the woodwork to express their feelings of love and loss for her. So naturally, people started retelling the events that happened during the Queen's reign.

One of the defining moments of her reign was the scandalous breakup and divorce of Prince Charles and Princess Diana. Shortly after their divorce, Princess Di died in a tragic automobile accident. I saw a video this week, which I don't recall seeing at the time, of Princess Di's funeral procession. Something which caught my eye was that as the Princess' casket passed in front of the Queen, she bowed.

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<sup>1</sup> The Nicene Creed, *United Methodist Hymnal*, 880.

<sup>2</sup> The Apostle's Creed, Ecumenical Version, *United Methodist Hymnal*, 882.

In a monarchy – a country ruled by a king or queen – the top level aristocrat never bows. It's a sign of subservience. Of being less than the other. In this particular video, Queen Elizabeth stoops in honor of her ex-daughter-in-law. In taking on human skin, we see God bow in deference to sin and death in behalf of us. It's mind-boggling that the Sovereign of the Universe would be concerned with the likes of us, but He is!

### **The Gulf Is Crossed by Jesus**

Jesus finishes this parable, by referencing Himself, through the dialog Abraham tells the rich man. "Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.' 'No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead,'" (verses 29-31). Only Jesus does that. Only Jesus rises from the dead. Only Jesus can cross the gulf between life and death, and rise again.

He conquers death and sin for us. He gives us new life in Him. That's the message – that's the Good News – that we have, and the world is desperate to hear. So how do we spread the best news that's ever been known? We need to have godly wisdom in how to best share it with an unbelieving world.

Friends, that's something we need to sort out as a local church in the weeks ahead. So I'd like us all to commit to setting aside fifteen minutes a day to pray specifically for us as a local church. Pray for us together, to have discernment to know what God's will is for New Hope. And then, when we know what His will for us is, pray that we would stride boldly, confidently, and in unison into being the people God has called us to be.

**Prayer:** Holy God, You reach out in love through Jesus Christ to save us so that we may live as faithful servants of You alone. Unchain us from our desire for wealth and power so that we may, in turn, release others from the prisons of poverty, hunger, and oppression. Amen.