

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
September 25, 2016

“Bridging the Great Divides”

**“... between us and you
there is a great gulf fixed.”**
Luke 16:26 (KJV)

Prelude

Forty-five or more years ago,
as a teenager in high school,
one of my classes was choral
music. I'm not sure how I got
involved with singing in the
school choir, although I do like
to sing. I have but faint recollection
of the hours standing on risers,
except that it was fun, engaging
activity for me. There were lots
and lots of sopranos and altos,
row upon row upon row;
a few tenors; and fewer still
who could vocally reach into
the depths of the base cleft.

We practiced in preparation for
concerts and competition.
Somewhere in a treasure chest that
contains remnants of my youth
there may be a bronze medal
embellished with ribbon indicating
some measure of excellence in
choral performance. I'll have to
go digging to see if I still carry
that trinket.

I can't recall many songs in our repertoire,
but there is one whose imprint still registers
and periodically resurfaces in the soul's
stereo - "Rock a My Soul."

*Rock a my soul in the bosom of Abraham
Rock a my soul in the bosom of Abraham
Rock a my soul in the bosom of Abraham
Oh, rock my soul.*

*So high, I can't get over it
So low, I can't get under it
So wide, I can't get 'round it
Oh, rock my soul.*

Curious that I picked this song up in public
school; I never heard it in church.
Peter, Paul & Mary recorded this song;
so also Elvis. The chorus didn't sing it
with quite the style or swing like any
of these, but sing it we did, with
the minimal accompaniment
we were provided. And for me,
the song has endured.

The song came to mind this week due to
the parable we've had presented in our worship.
The gospel of Luke is the only New Testament writing
to speak of this parable,
and this parable is the only one that
references Abraham's bosom
being ample to rock the soul.

So we have parable of Jesus,
delivered by Luke, that is
singularly unique.

In her commentary on Luke, Sharon Ringe suggests this parable is a Jesus-inspired spin on a “folk tale” traceable to North Africa; that it had its genesis in Egypt, and that it worked its way into
the table of contents,
the moral outlook and spiritual consciousness,
of Luke’s church (see S. Ringe, *Luke*, p. 217).

The parable illustrates Luke’s keen interest in economic issues, and how the Jesus way challenges and transforms the relationship that exists between wealth and poverty.

In the words of one scholar (Bernard Brandon Scott), when compared with Mark and Matthew, Luke **“consistently sharpens Jesus’ words on poverty”** (see *Hear Then the Parable*, p. 128).

Luke writes with a preference, a heightened concern over both the perils of excessive wealth vs. the perils of excessive poverty.

This concern is not confined to the parables of Jesus, as the farmer possessed with such surplus he determines to expand his storage capacity, who says to himself:
Soul ... relax, eat, drink, be merry;
called out by God as: “You fool!”
whose life that very night was called into account (see Luke 12:15-20).

Luke alerts us early on that gospel changes the relationship between the mighty and the meager.

The theme is recorded in Mary's song:
... the powerful are brought down from their
 thrones, the lowly are lifted up;
the hungry are filled with good things,
the rich are sent empty away
(see Luke 1:52-53).

The theme resounds in the preaching of
John the Baptist, who warned those who
crowded within the tents of the revival service:
'Do not begin to say to yourselves,
**"We have Abraham as our ancestor;
for I tell you (said John), God is able from
these stones to raise up children to Abraham"**
(see Luke 3:8).

When speaking of Jesus teaching,
it is Luke who states: **"Blessed are the poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God"** (Luke 6:20).
Curious, isn't it, on a question as important
as Jesus' teaching of the Beatitudes,
there are two versions of this blessing.
Luke's, "Blessed are the poor;"
Matthew's, "Blessed are the poor in spirit."

Don't you wonder who was critiquing whom?
Would Luke read Matthew and say:
 He's gone soft!
Would Matthew read Luke and say:
Far too strident. Gonna' lose the suburban
crowd who are already overstressed in
maintaining their lifestyles.

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Our lesson was told for the benefit of
"Pharisees," said by Luke to be
"lovers of money."

Lovers of money.

We read in I Timothy:

“The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains”

(I Timothy 6:10).

Lovers of money.

We read in II Timothy:

“In the last days distressing times will come ... people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money ... holding to the outward form of godliness but denying its power”

(II Timothy 3:1-2, 5).

Lovers of money.

The Pharisees. Pharisees who mocked and scoffed at Jesus. He was ridiculed by lovers of money. Twice in Luke’s gospel we read of Jesus being the recipient of scoff. Ridicule. The Greek word is “**ekmukterizo**,” which literally translates “**to hold up**” the “**nose**” with scorn. This occurred when Jesus was on the cross (and he could not save himself); it occurred just prior to the telling the parable that features the rich man and Lazarus.

Lover of money.

The Pharisees. Jesus did not mince words in speaking to these:

“God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God”

(see Luke 16:14).

What is an abomination in the sight of God?
When Jesus is our guide, the clearest statement
we have in our New Testament might well be the parable in
our morning lesson.

The parable presents two extreme conditions
of wealth and poverty.

The rich man,
 refined, regally dressed;
whose table is full and fit
 for sumptuous dining.
At his gate, Lazarus,
 in a deplorable state,
 an extreme plight.

Lazarus - a Greek name, derived from the Hebrew
 “Eleazar,” which means: God helps.

Lazarus - full of sores.

Lazarus - so near. At the gate. The front door.

Lazarus - an acceptable part of the landscape;
 yet ignored and overlooked.

Lazarus - a miscarriage of life in poverty.

Lazarus - abandoned; alone; whose only contact
 is with dogs, who lick his wounds.

Lazarus - “God helps.”

They die, these two parabolic characters.

The rich man overdosed on himself.

Lazarus starved at the gate,
in the face of the rich man's
table waste.

The rich man is buried.
Lazarus is spirited off by angels,
to rest in peace in Abraham's embrace.

Lazarus is in a state of unspeakable bliss;
the rich man is tormented,
caught without clue or code,
unable to alter his state; his fate is
"spun out in grim detail" (see Ringe, p. 217).

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The parable is full, complex,
spoken for the benefit of those
who are lovers of money,
who have pierced themselves, and others,
with many pains; who turn up
their noses at Jesus.

I'd like to highlight just a couple of
its features that I find compelling
for us in our time.

The first is mention of the "**great chasm**"
that divides the rich man and Lazarus.
In death, the this chasm, this great gulf,
is fixed. No intercourse from one side
to the other. It is so high, so low, so wide.

The chasm was there in life,
but it was not fixed. Which suggests,
until death, the great divides which
mark our lives, can be bridged, that
separate lives can come together,
that differences can be transcended.

The church hasn't always addressed this dimension of gospel, and when it has, it hasn't always addressed it well. And sometimes, dare I say often times, the church has not fully comprehended the mind of Christ, indeed, the church has preferred to side up with the rich.

Interesting, the teaching of scripture that a lot folks know, is the statement, **"... you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me"** (Matthew 26:11; see also Mark 14:7). Luke does not include that passage in his gospel. He has, I sense, a different outlook in mind for the church he serves.

The challenge is as old as the Proverbs as fresh as the disparities that scar life today.

Two proverbs in close proximity.
"The poor are disliked even by their neighbors, but the rich have many friends" (Proverbs 14:20);
"Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honor the Creator" (Proverbs 14:31).

The "chasms" today are generating any number of protests and demonstrations. There is growing weariness with what is ingrained in society - the ingrained violence, the fear, all tied and often wrapped in race and poverty, and politics.

Poverty is not a social construct based upon a divine plan. Poverty is a human creation.

Poverty and its challenges will never go away by making America great again; but only when we muster the resolve to make America better in a way its never been.

And we, as Christians, need help pushing ourselves and our leaders to overcome. We can start by praying for our governor to become better acquainted with the stains of racism and poverty impacting us all. He was recently quoted as saying: **“there is far too much talk about institutional bias and racism within law enforcement.”** Our governor is reading the wrong proverb (Proverbs 14:20). He could just as well have said, there is too much talk about Lazarus, not enough about how to help the rich man.

The purpose of wealth should not be its preservation; rather to harness and muster its power to reach and elevate and alter the low estate into which too many have fallen.

The parable this morning I hope will cause us all to pause - and to conduct a personal inventory. Who may reside in our shadows that we are overlooking; who may be wasting away at the gate of lives, whose life might we elevate if only we dare? In the words of Howard Thurman, who do we know who has their **“back against the wall.”**

What word is ours to speak,
what deed is ours to deliver,
to meet the needs of their hour?

Do not our own lives “come alive”
when we are able to help somebody?

A closing word on this parable of the rich man and Lazarus.

It reminds us that we are part of a long and rich tradition that has a broad view of life and the accessibility of God's grace and mercy.

The rich man never did get the message. Even in death his concern was confined only to his immediate family. He mentions the five brothers who need to be warned, that they might avoid the torments of life squandered by overlooking and ignoring the Lazarus' of the world.

Send somebody risen from the dead he pleads. Father Abraham is not convinced this will alter the course of the few the rich man is concerned about. Let them listen to the law and the prophets. They should serve well. They have enough.

Resurrection doesn't change, alter, everything. What resurrection does change is the heart, the hope, the outlook, of those who have come to believe and bank on Jesus' love.

Resurrection does change those who can see Jesus in Lazarus; those who see at the gate; those who see Jesus on the cross. Resurrection does change those who see Jesus - not only despised and rejected, dead and buried, but carried off by the angels into the everlasting arms.

Our own time will come. Until that great day, let us be lovers of God, and friends of Jesus. May we be wise, careful and kind, with all whom we encounter,

for our sake just as much as for theirs.

Amen.

*(Sermons are typically composed in haste,
for the demands of the day are many;
so be charitable as you read; and remember:
the contents of this sermon have not been edited
and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)*