

So Great a Chasm

Year C, Proper 21 – Luke 16:19-31

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, September 29, 2013

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

What a rich parable we have this morning. Just as last week's lesson from Luke's Gospel is one of my *least* favorite, this week's has always been on my top ten list. This story about an extremely rich man and an extremely poor man, about their relative conditions in this life and the next, and about their different responses to that radical reversal is sumptuous fair for any preacher – especially here as we wrap up our annual operating fund campaign. But I've got to say that what kept jumping out at me as I went about the busy-ness of this past week, was something a little different than what I've seen there before and has nothing whatsoever to do with operating fund campaigns and such. What kept calling itself to my attention was that phrase there in the middle. "Besides all this," Jesus quotes Abraham in his story, "besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed..."

It's easy enough to understand, I suppose, how I might let a chasm grow up between myself and the pain and death in this sinful and broken world.

Not long ago, on my way home from an errand across the bridge, I decided to pop into the Dairy Queen for my current favorite frozen treat, a Choco-cherry-love Blizzard. It was late afternoon and the place was packed with families, the youngest members dressed mostly in grass stained football or soccer uniforms. As I ate my Blizzard, my eye caught on one little fella', about eight or nine years old. He had apparently finished his treat and was transfixed by the TV mounted up in the corner running one of the 24-hour news channels. (I suppose more for the amusement of the staff than their diminutive clientele.) I watched his face contort and flinch as story after story cycled through. Another tropical storm tearing through the Gulf. Another deadly car crash on some Midwest interstate. Another band of gunmen killing as many people as they can find, this time in Kenya. Another bombing in Iraq, or Afghanistan, or Pakistan, or... On and on it went, while this little one soaked it all in, gently kicking his sneakered feet that didn't quite touch the floor. So great a chasm has been fixed...

It's easy enough to understand, I suppose, how I might let a chasm grow up between myself and the pain and death in this sinful and broken world. And then I realize that all too often I have let a chasm equally deep and equally wide grow between myself and a *lot* of people. How many times have we let a person's background or their skin color or their language or their accent become stumbling blocks to even knowing another person? How many times has the fact that someone's clothing or grooming or mode of transportation just isn't up to our standards of style or taste set a chasm between us and them? How many times has their clothing or grooming or mode of transportation been just a little *too* pretentious for our taste? So great a chasm has been fixed...

And how many times have we let an unintended insult or a perceived slight separate us from even those who are closest to us... So that husbands hear only "Why don't you..." and never "thank you." So that wives hear only "Why can't you ever..." and never "you are precious to me." So that children hear only "How could you be so..." "Why can't you be like..." "If you *ever* do that again, I'll..." and never *hear* "I am so proud, and so blessed that you are mine." So great a chasm has been fixed...

How many times have we looked the other way? How many times have we walked on the other side of the road? How many times have we pretended that we just didn't hear, that we just

didn't see, that we just didn't feel? The difference doesn't have to be nearly as obvious as Jesus' story for us to know that there's a great chasm between us.

The real problem, you see, the real reason that such chasms separate us from one another, that separate us from our enemies, that separate us from the ones we are called to serve, that separate us from even the ones we so desperately *want to love*, is that we have allowed a chasm as wide as eternity to open between us and the very one who made us. As the crowning act of God's creation, we were made in his image, with the imprint of the eternal One at the very depth of our souls. But as we march through our lives grabbing and grasping and looking out for "number one," we turn our backs on what it means to be formed to love, what it means to be fully human.

Bit by bit, we harden our hearts so that others can't break us. Bit by bit, we tighten and toughen ourselves up so that others can't hurt us. Bit by bit, we build higher walls and dig deeper moats so that others can't touch us. Bit by bit, we open the chasms between us wider and wider and wider until we are absolutely isolated from one another and from the very one who made us to love him and to love one another. And, with that *other* man in torment, we realize how great a chasm has been fixed between us.

If only someone could cross that great chasm... If only someone would come to us from the other side... If only someone would come to us from the dead...

When I was a young man, about the age of the kids in our youth group, I suppose, I had a friend named Rex Freed. He was a four or five of years older than I, our pastor's son. I think that our parents thought we might help one another since he was the youngest in his family and I was the oldest in mine. I loved hanging around with Rex, and he at least *appeared* to like having me around.

Rex was *cool*. Rex was cool because he wore moccasins while I had to wear sneakers from Phil's Discount Shoes. ("Man alive, two for five!") Rex was cool because he had a whole collection of paperback anthologies of the wonderful work of Mad Magazine. ("What, me worry?") But most of all, Rex was cool (and you have to remember it was the early 70's) because he was a potter. Not like some kids, making pots in art class or something. Rex had his own pottery wheel out on the patio where he sat for hour after hour most days, literally turning out one piece of beauty after another. Whenever I hung out with Rex, we would invariably end up out there on the patio with me watching in awe as my friend's fingers pushed and pulled and molded and shaped a formless lump of clay until it was something strong and elegant and useful.

Every now and then, he would let *me* sit at the wheel and I would try my own clumsy hand at the task, usually with Rex laughing so hard he had a hard time staying on his feet. I would pull at the clay until it fell back into a formless blob. Or I'd pinch too hard and watch half my creation go spinning off into the back yard. Or I'd work and work and work until there was no moisture left in the clay and it would begin to crumble in my hands. I can remember Rex saying as he sponged water down over my hands onto to the spinning mess, "If the clay doesn't stay pliable, it can't take the shape the potter wants."

You see, that great chasm that Abraham lamented in this morning's parable, that great gulf between one world and the next, that great *abyss* that separates us from the ones we love – and the One who loves us, that great chasm was breached once and for all, by the very person who told the story. That chasm between us and our God has been bridged by the cross of Calvary. That chasm has been destroyed by the power that destroyed death itself. We need not stay estranged from God or from one another. We need not fear for our life on earth, nor for our place in heaven. We need not let hate color our world, nor contempt rule our hearts. With our hearts softened by the waters of our Baptism and pliable to the master's hands we can not only see to the gates of God's promise, we can become *part* of the Christ's salvation. And maybe, just maybe, each of us can be the messenger that brings another lost one home. Maybe the poor man at the

gate. Maybe the *rich* man at the table. Maybe some little boy, whose feet don't quite reach the floor.