

Luke 16:19-31

¹⁹“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²²The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’ ²⁵But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. ²⁶Besides all this, 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, and no one can cross from there to us.’ ²⁷He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house— ²⁸for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ ²⁹Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ ³⁰He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ ³¹He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

The Unbreachable Chasm.

There is a saying that originated with a Chicago journalist and humorist named Finley Peter Dunne that it is the job of the newspaper “to comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable.” Many pastors have quite appropriately applied that saying to their own profession. Each week we encounter some people who are truly broken by shame and guilt over their own sins and other people whose pride has made them totally satisfied with themselves and their actions. To the former we offer the assurance that Christ died to free them from the bondage of their sins and the guilt and the shame that accompany them; to the latter we strive to crack that hardened shell of pride that prevents them from seeing the error of their ways. I much prefer to address the first group, to assure them of God’s love and grace and help them let go of their shame and their guilt and to live a new life as new creations in Christ. The second group for me is not so easy to change. They are easy enough to confront, but when confronted they often our church to find a pastor who is less confrontational, who doesn’t get in their face, who doesn’t expect them to change.

I wish that such people could see that the most compassionate thing a pastor can do for someone of their mindset is to shake them out of such a mindset. I wish that such people could see that it is one of the most painful things that pastor does – to expose their transgressions, to make them look for a moment at the error of their ways. I have a dog – Archie – and if you asked my wife who trained Archie to obey commands and not beg for food at the kitchen table and not sleep on the sofa when no one is around and not bark at any shadow that crosses the back window (we’re still working on that one) she would definitely say that it was *not* me. In the good cop / bad cop scenario of training a pet, I am definitely the good cop. I don’t like to confront animals or people over their bad behavior. My wife will shout out, “No barking!” and send Archie back to the laundry room when Archie detects someone walks past our yard; me, I’ll create a diversion.

“Let’s play ‘catch,’ Archie! Try not to look out the window.” I don’t think anyone enjoys disciplining a pet, but I am the absolute worst at it. And yet I understand that discipline is good. Discipline actually saves lives. And in the spiritual realm, discipline saves souls.

The parable that I picked for our scripture reading is a story that Pastor Jesus uses to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable, and it really tells us that God comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. We shouldn’t look at this parable as a glimpse into the afterlife; that’s not its intent. This parable is about the life we choose to live in the here and now and the great chasm that separates people from others. The parable serves more as a warning to the rich men of the world than a comfort to the poor people; Lazarus is not much of an actor in this drama. The story focuses on the rich man, and he is the one who I want to focus on now.

The sin of the rich man is not the fact that he is rich. There is no sin in being wealthy; some people can hardly avoid it. The sin comes from mismanaging one’s wealth. The sin of the rich man lay in his blindness. Lazarus lay at the man’s gate every day and could hardly go undetected by the rich man. Every day in the rich man’s goings and comings he would see this skinny, sickly man with sores over his body – Jesus adds that there were dogs who would come and lick his sores – the man was obviously sick and weak and hungry. But the rich man was blind to this – he wasn’t literally blind to this; he saw Lazarus and the story indicates that he actually knew Lazarus’ name. But the rich man was *spiritually* blind. He had closed the eyes of his heart to Lazarus and his suffering.

How does one close the eyes of one’s heart? How does one totally disconnect oneself from the suffering of someone else? I mentioned that the people who are hardest to change are the proud. And the proud are not just blind to poverty and suffering; they’re blind to everything. Their eyes are so focused on themselves that they cannot empathize with others, they cannot appreciate others, they cannot *love* others. If you notice there is no mention of anyone else in the place where the rich man is tormented. He is completely isolated, and that in itself is torment. And in order to endure his self-imposed isolation he must convince himself that he “stands above others.” The greatest temptation of wealth is that one becomes susceptible to the kind of pride that says to you, “I deserve all of this. I’ve earned it, and I can use it for my own pleasures.” That’s the kind of pride that causes so many of the rich to insinuate that there is something morally *wrong* with those who are poor. That’s the kind of pride that can cause people to say that they are better than another person because of their gender or the color of their skin or their hair or their eyes or the money in their bank account. Notice that the rich man never addresses Lazarus directly, and instead he asks Abraham to *order* Lazarus to bring him some water. That’s the kind of pride that makes one feel entitled. That’s the kind of pride that isolates people from one another as everyone strives to be God.

And this is the kind of pride that erects an impenetrable wall around a person. Jesus speaks of an unbreachable chasm between the rich man and Abraham, where no one can travel from one side to the other. Some may think this unfair. It sounds like the rich man is in hell, and I personally don’t like the whole notion of hell as a place of eternal torment. I wonder why a loving God would *cause* someone to suffer eternally for the sins of a single lifetime. It seems that the punishment is disproportionate to the crime. But God created us in his image, and among the greatest gifts that he gave us was free will, the ability to choose. The rich man was not forced to

turn a blind eye to Lazarus. The rich man was not forced to consider himself superior to Lazarus and deserving of all his wealth. The rich man freely chose to take the road that led him to self-isolation, and only he has the power to acknowledge his sin and repent of his ways. This is why the chasm is unbreachable – no one can do it for us. We must change our hearts and mend our ways.

And so we should look at the work of “afflicting the comfortable” as an act of compassion. Just as I have no doubt that my wife’s disciplining of our dog Archie is compassionate disciplining (she’s looking to the dog’s best interest), so too can we confront the proud and urge them to open their hearts to the ways of Christ *for their own good*. Whatever you may believe about the afterlife, there are plenty of people who dwell in the hell of self-absorption, self-isolation, and self-aggrandizement. It’s not a happy place to be. We can show them something better. We can show them the kind of love that embraces everyone, regardless of race or gender or wealth or country of origin. We can show them a community (I call it a church) where there is joy and forgiveness and acceptance and celebration. Let us do our best to help those around us to migrate to the right side of that unbreachable chasm, the place we call the Kingdom of God.