

Text: Luke 16:19-31  
Title: Mind the Gap  
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In Adult Education last week, I confessed that I love Jesus and the words of Jesus. I'd rather preach on a gospel text than take up Paul, or a psalm, or a prophet. And then Jesus says this....

These are vivid-vile images: Slobbering hound dogs lick the scabby sores of a poor man waiting for scraps to fall from the table. A rich man – trapped in blistering heat – thirsts for a drop of water to cool his cracked lips.

These are not the folksy images of a lost coin or a stray lamb. These are hard, and harsh, and not for children or the faint of heart. There's something terrible and terrifying here.

So, what are we to make of these words of Jesus?  
How are we to read them or live with them?  
What kind of wiggle room can we find?

This parable can be broken down into three acts:

The first act contrasts the wealthy man and Lazarus.

The second act describes the reversal of their conditions.

The third act depicts the rich man requesting a sign so that others can avoid his torment.

However, what the parable lacks is the sort of information that we need to offer a judicious and reasoned interpretation.

For example, it doesn't say if Lazarus was deserving of mercy or looking for a handout. It doesn't let us know if he was an addict, mentally ill, or just a good guy stuck in a bad economy. We don't know if he cried out, or if he lay there mute, eyes down, lost in the landscape. We don't know if he was the working poor, or the migrant poor, or the shiftless poor, or the beautiful poor...

All the parable offers is that he lay at the gate, sick and hungry. And that, Jesus seems to say, is all we need to know to predict the coming reversal.

But, of course, we don't know much about the rich man either.

We don't know if he disdained Lazarus, tried to get him moved from the entrance of his gated community, or barely paid any attention. We don't know if he muttered, "You can't help these people. They don't take responsibility. Certainly, don't give them money – it will just go to drugs."

All we know is that Lazarus dressed well, ate well, and that, Jesus seems to say, is all we need to know to predict the coming reversal.

Clarence Jordan in the “Cotton Patch Gospel” imagines the rich man calling out:

*“Oh, Father Abraham, send me my water boy. Water boy! Quick! I’m just about to perish down here. I need a drink of water.” That old rich guy had hollered for his water boy, “Boy, bring me water! Boy, bring me this! Boy, bring me that! Get away, boy! Come here, boy!”*

That reading reveals one more thing about the rich man: Even in hell he doesn’t get it. It’s not just that the rich man didn’t have compassion on Lazarus, it’s not just that he didn’t listen to Moses and the prophets, but even when he’s up to his neck in flames he still sees the poor man as a servant.

There’s no indication of repentance or a softening of his heart. He continues to locate himself in the geography of place and power; he still sees makers and takers. So, he asks for mercy not forgiveness. He asks for water not justice.

To his credit, the rich man worries about his family. He believes his brothers need to know about this state of affairs and suggests that if someone came back from the dead to report....

Father Abraham bluntly dismisses such a hope.

*If they did not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.*

So, what are we to make of these words of Jesus?

Maybe we each have our own experience with Lazarus at the gate. They stand at busy intersections holding cardboard signs. We see the same men and women in all seasons “working” the same corners. They drum on buckets and sell flowers. We avert our gaze, look down, look busy, and....

And I have no idea how to respond in meaningful-faithful ways. Supporting the women and children’s shelter or the daily lunches in Roseland seems far removed from the moment. Immigration policies, welfare reform, affordable health care, and a living wage all seem disconnected from those moments of encounter.

And, it’s hard to read our text from one cultural context to the next. Historians and archeologists note that there was often a bench set outside of homes where the poor could wait for assistance. It was a form or pattern of welfare....

Jesus says that this particular man “made good cheer every day.” Some translations have it that he feasted every day – meaning that the rich man repeatedly ignored these prescribed practices of compassion. And all Lazarus wanted was the left overs....

It’s probably also worth mentioning that this is the only time Jesus names a character in a parable. And, Lazarus literally means “God helps” or “the one whom God helps.” As one scholar puts it:

*Jesus does not let this opportunity to speak a word of comfort slip by. By giving the poor-suffering-man the name “God helps” Jesus adds even more hope to the image of him being comforted at the place of honor in heaven. The story may be for the transformation of another, but Jesus subtly communicates to those in need, “God sees you, too. God helps those in need.”*

Does that help? What if we thought about it this way?

Tucked away in this terrible-parable there’s a colorful Greek phrase: *mega chasma* – a huge chasm, a grand canyon, a giant gap. It reads as the fixed distance between Lazarus and Hades. Tradition places it as the chasm between heaven and hell, but what if we read it as the gap between the rich man and the poor man,  
the gap between the satisfied and the hungry,  
the gap between the sober and the strung out,  
the gap between the secure and the tossed aside?

In part, that *mega chasma* keeps us from seeing the poor as our sisters and brothers. If we see them at all, they easily become the objects of mission or the recipients of sympathy. They easily become the other. They easily become them and not us. But, part of what this parable points to is our commonality, our shared reality, our stitched-togetherness – the way in which our futures are intertwined.

Audrey West puts it this way:

*The parable is not primarily a lesson in what happens to people after they die ~ though it contains an inescapable element of caution regarding ways that money obscures our vision of both this world and the God who gives us life. It illustrates a reality made possible by the reign of God. The parable suggests that Jesus, the one raised from the dead, proclaims a worldview not bound by cultural assumptions of value or worth. Those who embrace this good news are empowered for repentance (metanoia), that is a change of heart and mind ~ a change particularly regarding their vision of what (and who) matters.*

About a decade ago Sandi and I were in London – we were looking for my roots and searching for my people. We loved it! The public train system (the Tube) was remarkable and easy to navigate. And every time you got on or off, a gentle voice reminded you to “mind the gap,” the distance between the platform and the train.

Can we read this parable as a way to “mind to gap”? Can we hear in the words of Jesus a change of heart, mind, and practice regarding the chasm between rich and poor?

There’s a small word in the second verse of our text that’s complicated to translate. It reads that Lazarus “was laid” at the gate. The verb is passive. Either someone carried him and set him there, or it was some divine action. God “laid” him there....

But the verb is also the same word used for throwing out worthless salt in Luke 14:35, or throwing something into the fire in Luke 3:9.

The poor man was thrown away.

The poor man was a throwaway.

So, look, I don't have easy answers, but I do think this parable invites repentance – a change of heart and mind. It means relationships – not for the sake of curiosity, convenience, or conversion – but of mutuality, vulnerability, and shared futures. It means a commitment to relationships that stretch us and break us because by grace we come to see no one as a throwaway....

That's a really difficult turn. It's easy to throw money at a ministry; it is harder to know how to faithfully change practices and patterns. Even when the gospels are loaded with warnings....

Listen to Jesus earlier in Luke:

*There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrown out (same word). Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God. Indeed, some are last who will be first and some are first who will be last.*

Dear friends, according to Jesus there's a coming reversal.

And, according to Jesus, it seems fitting and faithful that we mind the gap – that we see one another, rich and poor, as inextricably stitched together in the same fabric. There is no one who is thrown away.

For the gospels bear witness to a God who poured himself out in Christ for both the thrown away beggar and the self-absorbed rich man.

May we live in such a manner that we bear witness to one who bridged the *mega chasma* and inaugurated a kingdom where the tables are turned.

Amen.