Sunday, June 5, 1983
BEWARE THE CHASM
Luke 16:19-31

"There was a rich man, who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day." The rich man died. If you ever have to write an obituary for someone who died, try to express in a single sentence that which was most characteristic of that person. You might say, for example, "He was a good father," or "She was a good mother," or "She was a civic leader," or "She was the most kind person I ever met."

Now just imagine that in this parable we have a situation where there is nothing that can be said about a person except that he was a rich man and that he feasted sumptuously every day and that he possessed a magnificent wardrobe. Nothing else impressed itself on the minds of those who knew him. It was difficult to find anything to say about him when he died except, "He was a rich man."

It reminds me of the story of the man who lived in a small town, and this man was so bad, that when he died, the relatives could not find a minister or priest in that town to speak at his funeral. Each person who was asked refused because it would be impossible to say anything positive about the one who died. Finally, after an exhaustive search, a minister in a neighboring town agreed to speak at the funeral. His message, however, was very brief. All he said was, "His brother was worse!"

In the parable of Dives and Lazarus, however, Jesus did not condemn the rich man, Dives, for his wealth. Nor does Jesus imply that Dives was to blame for Lazarus' misery, poverty, and disease. It was simply the way things were. Jesus was describing a situation that is present in every time. There are rich and there are poor. There are the healthy and there are the sick. There are the intelligent and there are those who are not so intelligent. There are those who get all the good breaks and those who seem to be mostly unlucky. The life of Lazarus was nothing but a miserable experience, while the life of Dives went on as usual, with him doing the things he liked to do. Dives was not an evil person. He was not the kind who foreclosed on widows and orphans or who sought special tax legislation to protect his fortune or who exploited his employees or who made illegal campaign contributions.

The parable does imply, however, that if one's whole life is absorbed in his or her wealth, or however else one is rich, that person is likely to be constantly amusing himself in order to prevent himself from seeing that right next door to where he lives there is another world, the world of the slums with Lazarus and his sores and his filthy rags.

Let's look at Lazarus for a moment. The name "Lazarus" means "God is my helper." Although Lazarus was poor, the parable is not about the blessings of poverty any more than it is about the curse of riches. It was not riches in themselves that brought Dives to hell, nor was it poverty that brought Lazarus to heaven.

Lazarus, in his misery and poverty, could have become very bitter. Affliction can teach us to pray, but it can also teach us to curse. Furthermore, when the Bible speaks of poverty, it does not necessarily have to do with a lack of money. The poor in the Bible are those who have no abilities, no accomplishments to boast of — they are people who live on the fringe of life and who are always in need of help.

If you have ever had the experience in which all of your usual securities were pulled out from under you, then perhaps you have also had the experience of learning that it is precisely in these situations that the blessing and guarding of God are nearest just at the point when we could no longer rely upon our usual securities. Then we know that God gives His love to every human being who stands before Him with empty hands. We are accepted. And so, Lazarus had nothing in life except this one thing, that he could count on the mercy and love of God.

Both Dives and Lazarus die. The same end comes to all of us, rich or poor, healthy or miserable. But now the tables are turned. Lazarus was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. That's the Bible's way of saying that he was in paradise, that he was with God totally. But Dives, to his own shock and amazement, found himself a long way off. He was in torment. The torment was made worse by the fact that now, for the first time, he sees afar off, and Lazarus is no longer miserable and covered with sores.

Dives was in utter loneliness. He was able to conceal this in life. To see this is really what hell is. For to be in hell simply means to be utterly separated from God and from others, but in such a way that one is compelled to see that, just as a thirsty person sees a spring of water from which he dare not drink. This is hell: to be forced to see the glory of God, but have no access to it.

While we are alive here and now, we are often able to hide ourselves from our true condition, but there comes a time when all we have hidden is revealed.

Dives, the rich man, now is aware of much that he was unaware of in life. According to the parable, he yelled to Abraham off in the distance, "Father Abraham, please, I need a drink of water. Send my old friend Lazarus over to cool my tongue." And Abraham said, in effect, "Son, you don't seem to have gotten the idea yet. Lazarus isn't running any more errands for you. In fact, even if he wanted to, he couldn't for, you see, there's a great chasm that has come between him and you, and now it cannot be crossed in either direction."

Dives couldn't believe it. "It's not fair. Nobody told me! I wasn't warned! At least, then, send Lazarus back to life to warn my brothers about the chasm. They don't know any more than I knew." Abraham replied, "They have already been told, but haven't listened, just as you did not listen. The message was there all the time. And if you didn't hear the message then, and if they don't hear the message now, neither will they be convinced if someone should return from the dead and try to warn them. All the time the chasm has been forming the separation, and you just wouldn't face it."

So, the parable makes two main points for us here and now, just as it did when Jesus told it to those around him.

The first is a warning about chasms that can form between us and others who are different from us. And it's not just about the chasm that so often comes between the rich and the poor, although that is certainly included.
Nearly a century ago, Andrew Carnegie said, "The millionaires are the bees that made the most money and contribute most to the hive, even after they have gorged themselves full... Oh, these grand immutable, all-wise laws of natural forces, how perfectly they would work if human legislators would only let them alone." That's a chasm. It's like saying, "We have it; we deserve it. Let us alone. We know what's best for ourselves and for everybody."

In a similar vein, George F. Baer, president of the Reading Railroad, said, “The rights and interests of the laboring man will be protected and cared for by the Christian men to who God in his infinite wisdom has given control of the property interests in this country.”

Beware the chasm! So easy it is for any one of us to think that we have it and we deserve it and we are in control, and we begin digging a chasm between ourselves and others whom we are certain are less deserving than we.

The parable warns us that in one way or another, most of us are rich, and therefore at some point in our lives we, too, face the question of whether we also despise our brother Lazarus and in our thinking and action banish him to the back door, out of sight, and the chasm begins to form.

Some time ago, John Erlichman, one of Nixon’s chief advisors and who now lives a totally different kind of life in New Mexico, talked about the chasm that exists between the protected life of the Washington politician and the people he is supposed to represent. He therefore suggested that such things as limousines and chauffeurs and special dining rooms and other privileges be canceled. He pointed out that those in power too easily get insulated from the rest of the people, and a chasm forms that cannot be crossed.

But now let’s talk about us. I cannot speak for what goes on inside of you, but I do know that for me, at least, there are all manner of kinds of lifestyles, categories of problems, types of people, social or cultural groups that in subtle, rationalized ways get the chasm treatment; the gap begins to form between me and them. I don’t want to see them. I don’t want to admit that they are human beings. I find it difficult to identify with them. I don’t want to understand their problems or their misery.

We each probably have our special victims, but some of the more popular ones are the ones that make us livid with anger, and we wish they would disappear and not be constant reminders to us of the injustice in society: militant blacks, militant Indians, militant feminists, drug users, chronic welfare recipients, the crippled, the aged, the infirm, the mentally ill. Beware the chasm!

In one way or another, each one of us has poor Lazarus lying at our door, and we try to avoid him. We are afraid to come too close in touch with misery. It might rub off on us. Every form of segregation that we practice helps to form chasms that one day are difficult to bridge — blacks in slavery, Indians on reservations.

Beware the chasm! Everything that makes our life spacious and fascinating — our money, our vitality, our happy temperament, the fact that we are respected — can come between us and those we consider less fortunate, and it can, therefore, come between us and God.

What we try to avoid, what we don’t want to know, can hurt us. What we refuse to look at and deal with diminishes us and erodes our humanity. Most of us don’t want to know what goes on in the prisons and jails and juvenile institutions of our country. Keep Lazarus at the back door, out of sight! He isn’t our concern.

Yet the fact is that what we are unwilling to face and to try to understand and are all too willing to dismiss is, in all likelihood, that which we most need to understand. Beware the chasm!

Self-righteous religion can cause deep chasms. People who are certain they have all the answers and that their way is the only way soon dig deep canyons between themselves and others.

Chasms can form in many ways. There are people reaching out for help, and we sometimes miss them. In the church I serve in Lincoln, we have “prayer request” cards available in the card holders in the pews. Some of the requests we receive on these show how much people are reaching out. Here are two recent examples:

“You do not know us. But my daughters and I have problems. We just moved here from out of town. My oldest is on probation. She refused to go to school. She wishes to return to where we came from to stay with her grandmother. My oldest two are very jealous of each other. My second oldest is seven months pregnant. My youngest is very hostile and upset over all our arguments. Maybe if strangers pray for us, I can keep my girls together. I am seriously thinking of suicide, as I have no desire to live. Thank you.”

“Sometimes I feel I just can’t go on, and I don’t think I can stand the pressure of another day. Would you please remember me in your prayers and those like me? Is it possible to die from loneliness and a broken heart?”

The very act or process of pushing something out of our minds, out of the realm of our mercy, out of the scope of our concern... ends up being that which Dives discovered too late. He had moved himself away from life. The chasm had formed, and now it could no longer be bridged.

The second point of the parable is that we cannot use the excuse that we didn’t know any better. The fact is, we are being warned all the time about the danger of chasms forming, and if we do not hear the warning, there will be no special message to save us. Do not imagine that a messenger will come from beyond to straighten us out at the last moment.
There will be no one appearing from the dead; no voice from heaven will sound. We have only the Word, the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ. God comes to us in quiet, unobtrusive ways. Jesus never loved public miracles. He knew these would never cause anyone to really change their ways.

So, beware the chasm! If we choose a cheap heaven here and stay only in our own little world, we may cause a chasm that will be too difficult to cross later — even impossible. If we live without compassion and become hardened, callous people, we dig a chasm between ourselves and others and at the same time separate ourselves from God.

The opposite of forming a chasm is identification. It is the characteristic all saints have in common. Through some mysterious process, they are able to identify with the full range of creation. They identify with the leper and the criminal, with the infirm, the disfigured, and the retarded, with the thief and the alien, with the coward and the heretic, with the hippy and the square. They comprehend the sharingness of creation.

This is the kind of person Jesus was. He saw the human being in Zacchaeus, in the prostitute and the cripple, the mentally ill, the child, and the thief on the cross. The more we can identify with persons unlike ourselves, the more fully we enter into humanity and into God’s kingdom.

Chasms can be bridged! A few years ago, I got this beautiful letter:

“Dear Dr. Young:

“My husband and I listen to your sermons on the radio every Sunday morning. I want you to know that your sermon yesterday motivated my husband, who is not well, to give me the nicest Christmas gift he has given me in nearly 46 years of marriage. He said, ‘After hearing Dr. Young’s sermon, and since it is Christmas and all, I want you to know it has been hard for me to say, but you know I have always loved you.'”

Shortly after that letter, I called the woman, who was a member of another church, and she told me her husband had died.

Each day, in each relationship, we can be forming chasms or we can be building bridges between ourselves and those different from us. God wants us and all people to be bridge builders. Amen.