Sunday, October 1, 1989
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 what best describes that individual. You might say, for example, "She was a good mother," or "She was a civic leader."

All that could be said about this individual was, "He was a rich man." In so doing, Jesus was not condemning the man for his wealth, but simply stating a fact. The parable does imply, however, that if one's whole life is absorbed in his or her wealth, that person is likely to be insulated from the rest of society and will probably not be aware of another world, the world of the slums with its poverty, its disease, homelessness, and hunger.

The other main character in the story is a man named Lazarus, and by contrast, he was very poor, hungry, and full of sores. The name "Lazarus" means "God is my helper."

Although he was poor, the parable is not about the blessings of poverty any more than it is about the curse of riches. It was not being rich in itself that brought the rich man 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, or it can teach us to curse. And when the Bible speaks of poverty, it does not necessarily have to do only with the lack of money. The poor in the Bible are also 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. Jesus indicated that it is easier for such people to come close to God.

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 come to realize that it is precisely then that the blessing and mercy of God are nearest — just at the point when you could no longer rely upon your usual securities.

And so Lazarus had nothing in life except this one thing that he could count on — the mercy and love of God.

Both the rich man and Lazarus died. But now the tables are turned. According to the parable, Lazarus was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. That's the Bible's way of saying that he was in heaven, that he was with God totally and completely.

But the rich man, 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 from where he was, he could see paradise, and he could even see Lazarus there. And Lazarus is no longer miserable and covered with sores.

To be able to see paradise, and yet know you are separated from it, is to be in hell. To put it another way, to be in hell is to be utterly separated from God and others, but in such a way that you are compelled to see that — just as a thirsty person sees a spring of water from which

he or she cannot drink. This is hell — to be forced to see the glory of God but have no access to it.

In this life, we are frequently able to hide ourselves from our true condition, but there comes a time when all we have hidden is revealed.

The rich man in death is now aware of much that he was unaware of in life. According to the parable, he called out to Abraham off in the distance, “Father Abraham, please, I need a drink of water. Send Lazarus over to dip his finger in water and at least cool my tongue.” Abraham answered, “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.”

The rich man couldn’t believe it. In this life, his money had been able to get him almost anything he wanted or needed. “It’s not fair,” he said. “Nobody told me. I wasn’t warned. At least then send Lazarus back to my former life to warn my brothers so that they don’t end up here in the same condition as I am in this place of torment.”

Abraham replied, “They have already been told, but haven’t listened, just as you did not listen. The signals from God were there all the time, but you didn’t pay any attention. And if you didn’t get the message from God 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.”

This parable makes two main points for all of us in this life.

The first is a warning about chasms or separations that can form between us and others who are different from us — between the rich and the poor, between black and white, between Jews and Christians and followers of Mohammed, between wives and husbands, between children and their parents, between employers and employees. We can become so separated from others that one day the chasm can no longer be bridged.
Nearly a century ago, Andrew Carnegie said, “The millionaires are the bees that made the most honey and contributed 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 everyone else as well.”

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

Whenever we are insulated too much from others who are different from us in any way, then chasms begin to form, and we can no longer identify with others.

A few years ago, at a national minister’s gathering, we had the journalist Bill Moyers as one of our speakers. When Lyndon Johnson was President, Moyers was, for a time, his Press Secretary. Mr. Moyers was talking to us about how Presidents and Members of Congress and Cabinet Members and other policymakers in Washington, D.C. can easily become too insulated from others. Limousines, chauffeurs, special dining rooms, Presidential helicopters, and all the other perks of office can make people forget how others live.

Moyers gave this example to illustrate the point. One late afternoon, President Johnson decided he wanted to see a Broadway Show in New York City that was a big hit. Arrangements were quickly made for the President to see the show that same evening. A helicopter took the President to the airport, the Presidential jet flew him to New York City. There was no waiting anywhere. All other incoming flights to LaGuardia Airport were put in holding patterns so that the Presidential jet could land. Traffic was stopped, and the Presidential limousine, which had been flown to New York on another plane, was waiting for him at the airport. With a police escort, he was whisked downtown to Broadway, and after the show, he was, in the same manner, returned to the White House in Washington, D.C., and was home in bed by midnight. Moyers accompanied him on the trip, and he said that the President, in all seriousness, remarked as they were riding in the limousine, “The traffic in New York City is not nearly as bad as people say it is!”

But let’s talk about us. I cannot speak for what goes on inside of you, but I do know that for me there are categories of problems, unusual lifestyles, types of people that, in subtle, rationalized ways, get the chasm treatment. I insulate myself. I walk on the other side of the street; I find it difficult to identify with them, and a chasm begins to form. I don’t hate them. I am not angry with them. I am indifferent toward them. I do not want to admit that they exist.

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 poverty and misery. It might rub off on us. Every form of segregation that we practice helps to form chasms that are difficult to bridge.

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 prisons and jails and the shelters for the abused and homeless. Keep Lazarus at the back door, out of sight. And when we do, chasms are formed.

In the parable, Jesus didn’t say that the rich man had to solve the problem of poverty. He was judged because he was indifferent to it, because he didn’t care. He simply failed to notice, and the chasm was created. The chasms that are formed in this life carry over into the life after this life.

The second point of the parable is that we cannot use the excuse that the rich man tried to use — that he didn’t know any better, that nobody had warned him. Remember, he wanted someone to go especially to warn his brothers. But Abraham said, “They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.”
In other words, God is giving us signals all the time. We cannot use the excuse that we did not know any better. There will be no special messenger coming back from the dead to warn us. And even if such a special messenger did come, we wouldn’t pay attention anyway.

Beware the chasm. If we choose to live insulated, isolated lives — if we choose to stay in our own little private world and close our eyes to the misery, poverty, and homelessness around us — 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. Jesus said, “As you did it unto one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it unto me.”

Jesus had three key words in his ministry — the last, the least, and the lost. He said, “The last shall be first, the least shall be the greatest, and the lost shall be found.” The descendants of Lazarus are all around us. They don’t fit into our standards of income, color, moral habits, or social customs. They need not simply a handout but a handclasp.

The opposite of forming a chasm is to build bridges that connect us to one another. It comes through a process called 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 comprehend the connectedness of creation. They see the image of God in each human being.

The more we identify with persons unlike ourselves, the more fully we enter into humanity and into God's community. Each day, in each relationship, we can be forming chasms, or we can be building bridges between ourselves and those different from us. Beware the chasm. Amen.