Sunday, September 27, 1992
CHASMS OR BRIDGES?
Luke 16:19-31

If you want to tell a story, how do you begin? We're all familiar with the opening line of many children's stories: "Once upon a time." Somewhere I read a list of the worst beginning sentences of fiction, and at the head of the list was the opening statement, "It was a dark and stormy night."

When Jesus told stories, he didn't try to be fancy with the first sentence. Instead, he was very direct. Some examples:

"There was a man who had two sons." These are the first words of the parable of the prodigal son. "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho." What follows is the story of the Good Samaritan.

"There was a rich man, who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day." A few sentences later, we are told, "The rich man died." If you have ever had to write an obituary for someone, try to express in a single sentence what best describes that individual. You might say, for example, "She was a wonderful mother," or "He was a civic leader who gave of himself for the good of others."

However, all that could be said about this individual was, "There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day." In beginning the story this way, Jesus was not condemning the man for his wealth, but simply stating a fact. It is strongly suggested in the story, 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 not be aware of other people who are different.

There is another character in the story whose name is Lazarus, and by contrast, he was very poor, hungry, homeless, and covered with sores. He lived outside the gate of the rich man's estate. So the story is about two men — one rich and the other poor. Jesus does not condemn the rich man for being wealthy. Nor does he blame him for being the cause of the poor man's poverty, misery, and disease. It was the way things were.

Life is filled with differences. There are rich and there are poor. There are the healthy and the sick. There are the intelligent and those not so intelligent. There are the lucky and the unlucky, the tall and the short, the abled and the disabled, young and old, bald and hairy, honest and dishonest — life is filled with differences.

Although Lazarus was poor, the story is not about the blessings of poverty any more than it is about the curse of riches. The parable does, however, strongly imply that if one's whole life is absorbed in his or her wealth, or however else one is rich — in intelligence, beauty, talent, or power — that person can become so inwardly focused that he or she is no longer aware of other worlds and other people who are different. Thus, the rich man in this story became so isolated from others that he was not even aware that poor people existed, and so a deep chasm began to form between himself and others.

What about the poor man, Lazarus? In his misery and poverty, he could have become very bitter. But there is no hint of that in the story. Affliction can teach us to pray, but it can also

cause 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 also those who have no abilities, no accomplishments to boast of — they are people who live on the fringe of life.

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 blessings of God are nearest, at the very point when you could no longer rely upon your usual securities. So this poor man, 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 the poor man died. The same end comes to all of us, rich or poor, healthy or sick, lucky or unlucky.

But now the tables are turned. Lazarus, the poor man, was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. That's the Bible's way of saying that he was in paradise, that his suffering was over, that he was totally with God. But the rich man, to his utter amazement, found himself a long way off. He was in torment. He was in hell. His agony was made worse by the fact that now, for the first time, he sees paradise, he is aware of God, and he sees Lazarus there.

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 and in hell is now aware of much that he was unaware of in this life. According to the parable, he called out to Abraham off in the distance, "Father Abraham, please, I need a drink of water. And if you can't come, then 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 anything he wanted. "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 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 were told, but you paid no attention. The signals from God were there all the time. And if your brothers don't get the message from God all along, they will not be convinced if someone should return from the dead and try to warn them. All the time the chasm has been forming, and you wouldn't face it. You were too occupied with yourself and with your own self-fulfillment."

The story makes two main points for us in this life here and now.

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, men and women, children and parents, wives and husbands, employers and employees, Serbs and Muslims. We can let ourselves become so separated from others that one day the chasm is so wide that it can no longer be bridged.
In her new and remarkable book, The Measure of Our Success, Marian Wright Edelman, in one of the 25 lessons for life she gives to her children, says: “Remember and help America remember that the fellowship of human beings is more important than the fellowship of race and class and gender in a democratic society.” Elaborating on this lesson for life, Ms. Edelman goes on to say, “Be decent and fair and insist that others be so in your presence. Don’t tell, laugh at, or in any way acquiesce to racial, ethnic, religious, or gender jokes or to any other practices intended to demean rather than enhance another human being. Through daily moral consciousness, counter the proliferating voices of racial and ethnic and religious division that are gaining respectability over the land.”

Another way to put it is, always remember that what unites us as human beings in God’s creation is much more important than what divides and separates us.

There are so many chasms being created and made wider in our time. Beware the chasm! It’s so easy for any one of us or any group to begin to think we have it all, and we deserve it, or that we are better in some way, or more loved by God, or that we are in control, and we begin digging a chasm between ourselves and others who are different from us in some small way.

Let’s be more personal. I cannot speak for what goes on inside of you, but I do know that for me there are unusual lifestyles, categories of problems, types of people, social or cultural groups that in subtle, rationalized ways get the chasm treatment. A gap, a distance, begins to form between me and them. I don’t want to see them. I walk on the other side of the street. I don’t want to admit that they exist. I find it difficult to identify with them. I don’t want to understand their problems or their misery.

We each have our special candidates. But some of the more popular ones are those that fill us with anger or disgust or who appear to be quite different. We wish they would disappear and not be constant reminders that there are problems in our society — militant blacks, militant feminists, drug users, chronic welfare recipients, the mentally ill, those who live on the fringe. 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 we allow helps to form chasms that one day are difficult to cross.

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 also form a chasm between them and us and between us and God. What we try to avoid, what we don’t want to know, can hurt us. Most of us don’t want to know what goes on in jails and prisons and 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 the rich man was the cause of the misery of Lazarus or had to solve the problem of poverty and disease. He was indifferent to it, and thus a chasm began to form that separated him from others. He closed his eyes and looked the other way. A great

chasm was created in this life, which carried over into his life after this life, and then it could no longer be bridged.

The second point of the parable is that we cannot use the excuse that the rich man tried to use — that he hadn't been warned, that he didn't know any better. Remember, he also then wanted someone to go warn his brothers who were making the same mistake. But Abraham said, "They are already being warned. They have Moses and the prophets; let them pay attention to them."
In other words, God is giving us signals all the time. We cannot use the excuse that we didn't 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 any more attention anyway.

Beware the chasm. If we choose to live insulated, isolated lives; if we choose to stay in our own little private and protected world and close our eyes to the misery and problems that others are facing around us; if we live without compassion and generosity and become hardened, callous people, we dig a chasm not only between ourselves and others but also between ourselves and 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. Many times, they don't fit into our standards of income, color, class, moral habits, or social customs. They do not need a handout but a handclasp.

The opposite of digging chasms is building bridges that connect us to one another. There's no greater joy in life than that which comes from building bridges to span the chasms that separate us. That's what being the church is all about. Recently, I came across this mission statement from another church that highlights this. It said, "We are a community of faith united in exploring what it means to follow the way of Jesus Christ, to be a people of God, and to love and care for our neighbors. As a church, we will know no circles of exclusion, no boundaries we will not cross, no loyalties above those which we owe to God." That says it all.

Ask yourself, are you letting chasms form in your life that keep you from others? I invite you to experience the joy of building bridges. Amen.