Sunday, October 1, 1995
WHERE DO YOU DRAW THE LINE?
Luke 16:19-31

We human beings draw so many lines and set up so many barriers that divide us. We have various ways of separating people into different groups or categories. He's rich; she's poor. He's a liberal; she's a conservative. I'm a European American, and you're an African American. I'm Catholic, and you're Protestant. I'm a Southern Baptist, but you're an Independent Baptist.

This is not to deny that there are differences among us. In certain ways, our human identity is unique to each one of us. As yet, there are no human clones. Being true to ourselves, therefore, means having integrity regarding our own best and distinctive ways of being human. It's good for us to honor our ethnic heritage and to affirm our gender. We need to affirm and fulfill our unique selves.

The Rabbi Zusya said a short time before his death, "In the world to come, I shall not be asked, 'Why were you not Moses?' Rather, I shall be asked, 'Why were you not Zusya?'"

At the same time, our Christian faith tells us that to be true to ourselves, we also need to be true to that deep humanity held in common — we are each created in the image of God. We are connected to each other because of our common origin in God, yet we are distinct individuals. We do not exist as formless, ethereal spirits. We know ourselves and others only as embodied selves, and we come in an endless variety of sizes, shapes, and colors, and in another endless variety of personalities, skills, and abilities. We are beautiful in our diversity and beautiful because of our common origin from God. Furthermore, we are so created by God that we need and depend on each other. And there's no greater joy that can come into our lives than through healthy and vital relationships with other human beings. God's love is experienced by us through our love for each other.

One of the supreme ironies of our time is that we are now connected to each other in so many ways that were impossible not very many years ago when we were separated by all kinds of physical barriers — mountains, rivers, oceans, and geographic distance. Added to these barriers was the fact that the world was sparsely populated. Because we rarely encountered or experienced people different from us, we were afraid of them.

Now, however, we can be easily connected to each other in so many ways, and these connections are important. The main reason that our newly formed constitutional government created the U.S. Postal Service in 1789 was so we could be connected to each other by mail. It's difficult to be one nation without being able to communicate with each other.

And look at what's happened since then — the telegraph, the telephone, railroads, highways, airline travel, radio, television, the fax machine, cellular telephones, paging systems, computers with modems, the internet, and communication satellites that beam all kinds of messages around the world instantly. All these connect us to each other in ways that a few years ago we could not imagine.

Yet, in so many ways, we remain divided and fearful of each other. We draw lines all the time that separate us. Lest you misunderstand, drawing lines or creating borders is not necessarily bad. They are important for our understanding and self-identity. There's a deep truth to the

statement that “nothing exists without its borders defined.” For example, your self-identity is known to you and others by your physical body. As I said earlier, you do not exist in this world as a formless ethereal spirit. The state of Nebraska would not exist as a physical entity without its borders defined.

But borders and the lines that we draw around ourselves or others can also be harmful if we let them become insurmountable barriers that we never let down, see through, or are afraid to question or cross.

That’s one of the main themes of the parable that Jesus told about the rich man and Lazarus as recorded in the Gospel of Luke.

The parable begins, “There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day.” In beginning the story in this way, Jesus was not condemning the man for his wealth but was simply stating a fact.

This rich man allowed his wealth to create a barrier between him and others, especially those who were poor. He was not cruel or callous, but indifferent. He was not consciously aware of the poor man Lazarus who lay at the gate to his estate and who tried to satisfy his hunger with the leftovers from the rich man’s table. He did not understand himself as being related to this poor man in any way.

As I said earlier, 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 poor. There are the healthy and the sick. There are the intelligent and the not-so-intelligent, the lucky and the unlucky, the tall and the short, Catholics and Protestants, Jews and Gentiles. Life is made up of differences.

But there’s one event that reaches all of us and wipes out those differences. Both the rich man and Lazarus died. The same end comes to every person, 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 was Jesus’ 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 now he can even see Lazarus, the one he had ignored before.

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, in the same way as a thirsty person sees a spring of water from which he or she cannot drink. To be in hell is to be able to see the glory of God but have no access to it.

In this life, we are often able to hide ourselves from our true condition, but there comes a time when all we have hidden is revealed. As Mickey Mantle said before he died, “If I had known I was going to live so long, I would have taken better care of myself.”

The rich man in death and in hell is now aware of much that he refused to see before. According to the parable, he called out to Father Abraham 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.”

But Abraham answered, “Son, you still haven’t gotten the message. Lazarus isn’t running any more errands for you. In fact, even if he wanted to, he couldn’t, for you see, a great chasm now exists between him and you, and 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 won’t end up here in the same condition as I am in this place of torment.”

But Father Abraham replied, “They have already been told but haven’t paid any attention, just as you were told and didn’t listen. The signals from God were there all the time. Moses and the prophets in your Hebrew tradition told you about these things. And if your brothers don’t get the message from God, they will not be convinced even if someone should return from the dead and warn them. The message has always been there, but you wouldn’t face it. You were too preoccupied with yourself and 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, barriers, or lines that we draw that can separate us too much from others. Usually, we draw these lines between ourselves 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, 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, or it’s too late to make the connection again.

I’ve known members of the same family who have become completely alienated from each other. One member refuses to forgive another for some wrong in the past, or one family member refuses to be reconciled even though forgiven. Then death comes to one or both, and it’s too late.

There are so many lines being drawn and chasms being created in our time, despite the fact that we have the technology and ability to be so closely connected.

Let’s be more personal. I cannot speak for what goes on inside of you, but I 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 line treatment. A gap, a distance, an invisible line is drawn 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 be aware of their problems and misery.

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 us to draw lines or build barriers that one day are difficult to cross.

The second main point of the story is that we cannot use the excuse that the rich man tried to use — that he had not been warned, that he didn’t know any better. God is giving us signals all

the time. 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 than we did before.

Where do you draw the line? If you choose to live an insulated, isolated life; if you choose to stay in your own little private and protected world and close your eyes to the misery and problems that others are facing around you; if you live without compassion and generosity and become a hardened, callous person, you begin to dig a chasm not only between yourself and others but also a chasm between yourself and God. Jesus said, "As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it unto me."

A rabbi is said to have once asked his students, "When can you know the night has ended and the day begun?"

One student suggested, "Is it the moment when you can tell the difference between a sheep and a dog?"

"No," said the Rabbi. Another student said, "Is it when you can see the difference between a fig tree and an olive tree?"

"Not that either," said the Rabbi. "Then when is it?" the students asked.

The Rabbi answered, "It is the moment when you can look at a face never seen before and recognize the stranger as a brother or sister. Until that moment, no matter how bright the day, it is still the night." Amen.