Sunday, September 30, 2001
WALLS AND CHASMS
Luke 16:19-31

A parable in Luke's gospel begins this way: "There was a rich man, who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. At his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores." That's all we know about this rich man.

When he died, there was nothing positive that could be said about him. The minister presiding at his funeral could've gone on to say, "This rich man never even noticed the poor man who lived at the gate to his estate and was starving to death and covered with sores." However, in funeral services, the minister presiding usually does not want to say negative things about the deceased.

If you have ever had to deliver a eulogy for someone who died, it's helpful if you can express in a sentence or two something positive about the person who died. Hopefully, you could say without any fear of contradiction, "She was a good mother," or "She was an outstanding civic leader," or "He treated every individual he met with respect and courtesy," or "She fought the good fight. She finished the race. She kept the faith."

Many of you have heard this story, which I've used in previous sermons. It's about a man who died in a very small town in Nebraska where everyone knew everyone. This man was so bad that no minister could be found to preside at his funeral because each one who was asked said, "He was so mean that there is absolutely nothing good that can be said about him." Finally, a minister in a neighboring town agreed to do the funeral. All he said was, "His brother was worse."

According to this parable in Luke's gospel, the rich man in this story had five brothers. Whether they were worse or not, we do not know. However, the story later on implies that they were at least equally insensitive to the poor in their midst as the brother who had died.

The main purpose of this story, as Jesus told it, is not to condemn this man and his brothers for being rich. 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, especially separated from the condition of the poor among them. This rich man and his brothers had built a wall around themselves, literally and figuratively. They had walled themselves off from 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. He is a very sorry case — too weak to move, he lies there and longs to eat the leftovers from the rich man's table. It was the custom among the wealthy to use bread to wipe grease from their hands and then to throw that bread to the dogs. But not only does Lazarus not get the dog food, he becomes dog food: the dogs lick at his sores.

The name "Lazarus" means "God is my helper." Although he was poor, the story 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. He could've become a criminal or even a terrorist. Affliction can teach us to pray, or it can teach us to curse. 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, no hope. They are people who live on the fringe of life and who are always in need of help. It may be 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. Because it is at that point when you realize that you can no longer rely upon your usual securities. Thus, it is no accident that since the terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington D.C. on September 11, more and more people have been turning to God and to prayer.

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

This story is addressed especially to those people who are convinced that their wealth has come about because God has blessed them more than others. And why has God blessed them more than others? Because they have obeyed God's commandments more than others. They are more righteous. Therefore, they are more deserving than others. The equation is: wealth = blessed of God = obedience to God's commandments. According to the Bible, that equation is false.

The story is also addressed to those people who believe that the poor man is poor because God is punishing him for not being in strict obedience to God's commandments. That also is not true. It is possible that the rich man could have defended his not helping Lazarus with the argument that one should not interfere when God is punishing such a person. Such has been the reasoning of some church people in this country who have refused to minister to the hungry and the homeless.

Poor Lazarus dies, and you can assume that everyone except the dogs is relieved. Lazarus is out of his misery and out of the rich man's entryway.

The rich man also dies. Now their positions are reversed. The rich man is in torment. His torment was made worse by the fact that from where he was, he could see paradise and could see Lazarus there, who 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.

The story tells us that in this life, we are sometimes able to hide ourselves from our true condition, but there comes a time when all that is hidden will be 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 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 still haven't learned your lesson. Lazarus isn't running

any errands for you. In fact, even if he wanted to, he couldn't. A great chasm has come between him and you, and now it cannot be crossed in any 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 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 did not listen. The signals from God were there all the time, but you did not pay any attention. And if you didn't get the message from God then, and if they don't hear it now, neither will they be convinced if someone should return from the dead and try to warn them."

This story makes several points that apply directly to us in this life.

The first point is a warning against building walls that will separate us from other human beings, especially those we consider to be different from us; walls between rich and poor, between black and white, between Jews and Christians, and between Jews, Christians, and Muslims, between children and parents, employers and employees. The wall that kept the rich man separated from Lazarus in this life became a wide chasm that in the end could not 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, those grand immutable all-wise laws of natural forces, how perfectly they would work if human legislators would only let them alone."

That's a wall that can become a chasm. It's saying, "We have it. We deserve it. Let us alone. We know what's best for ourselves and for everyone else as well."

Some years ago, Marian Wright Edelman wrote a short book with the title, The Measure of Our Success. In it, she outlines 25 lessons for life for her children. One of them is: "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."

There are so many walls being built which can turn into chasms. It's so easy for any one of us or any group to begin to think we have it all and that's because we deserve it and that's because we are more loved and favored by God, and we begin building a wall between ourselves and others who are different from us in some 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, cultural, or religious groups that, in a subtle, rationalized way, get the wall treatment. I try to build a wall 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 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 own 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.

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 prejudice or segregation we allow helps to build walls, and that can in the future turn into a chasm which is impossible to cross in either direction.

Any one of the things, or all of them together, that make our life spacious and fascinating — our money, our vitality, our happy temperament, the fact that we are respected — can begin to build a wall between ourselves and others who are different from us.

In the parable, Jesus didn't say or imply that the rich man was the cause of the misery of Lazarus or that he had to solve the problem of poverty and disease. He was indifferent to it, he didn't want to admit that it existed, he built a wall to hide himself from it. The wall in this life became a chasm in the next.

The second main point emerges in the story when we try to find ourselves. Where are we? We are the brothers. 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 wanted someone to go and warn his brothers who were making the same mistake that he had made. But Abraham in the story 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.

If we choose to live insulated, isolated lives; if we choose to build walls around ourselves in order to hide from the misery and problems others are facing; if we live without compassion and generosity and become hardened, callous people, a chasm begins to form not only between ourselves and those we consider to be different from us, but also a chasm between ourselves and God. Jesus said, "As you did it unto one of the least of these my sisters and brothers, you did it unto me." Amen.