Sunday, September 26, 2004
THE GREAT DIVIDE
Luke 16:19-31

The Bible, in its stories and commandments, has a lot to say about the relationship between the rich, the poor, and God. Here are a few examples. When Mary learned that she was to give birth to Jesus the Messiah, her song of praise and thanksgiving included these words: “God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.” (Luke 1:52-53)

In the preaching of John the Baptist, the gospel writers report him as warning the people to prepare for the coming of the Messiah and practice economic justice. “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.”

In Luke’s version of the Beatitudes, Jesus is quoted as saying: “Blessed are you who are poor... blessed are you who are hungry now...” These blessings are followed by warnings: “Woe to you who are rich... woe to you who are full now.” (Luke 6:20-26)

Luke also contains the parable of the rich man who spent his life building wealth, doing his best to keep it for himself while neglecting his soul. Jesus called this man a fool.

This connection between wealth and the desire to keep it all for oneself is underscored again in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, which is today’s scripture reading. The story begins, “There was a rich man, who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day.” His house was surrounded by some sort of fence or wall, which served to keep his possessions in and the riffraff out. In the parable, Jesus didn’t even give the rich man a name.

In beginning the story this way, Jesus was not condemning the man for his wealth but simply stating the facts. However, the parable implies that if your whole life is absorbed in your wealth and in protecting your lifestyle, you become insulated from the rest of society and you will not respect or appreciate people who are different.

There is another character in this story, and he has a name — Lazarus. He was very poor, hungry, homeless, and covered with sores. He lived outside the gate of the rich man’s estate. He was a sorry case, always hungry and miserable. He would have been satisfied to eat the leftovers from the rich man’s table, but the rich man wouldn’t even give him that much. It was the custom in those days among the wealthy to use bread to wipe grease from their hands and then to throw that bread to the dogs. But Lazarus didn’t even get the dog food. Instead, he became food for the dogs. The dogs licked his sores. Finally, Lazarus died, and in death, he was carried by the angels to be with Abraham in paradise. You can assume that everyone was relieved — except the dogs. Lazarus was out of his misery and out of the rich man’s way.

A few sentences later, the story tells you that the rich man died and was buried. However, in death, he finds himself not in paradise with Abraham but in torment.

Do not get too carried away with this picture of the afterlife. The point Jesus wanted to make was that in death, the fortunes of the two men are reversed, and now they are aware of things they were not aware of before.

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 and disease. The story describes life as it is. Life is filled with differences. There are rich people and poor people and those in between. Some people are healthy, others are not. There are intelligent people and those who are not as intelligent. Some people are lucky, others are unlucky. Some of you are natural athletes, others are not. 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, however, does highlight the danger of being so absorbed in your wealth or privilege, or however else you might be rich — in intelligence, beauty, talent, or power — that you become inwardly focused and unaware of other worlds and other people who are different.

If you have ever had the good fortune to travel to other places in this country or to other countries and experience how other people live and work, it can broaden your understanding. Otherwise, you can come to believe that your way is the only way and the best way.

The rich man in this story was so isolated from others that he was not even aware that a poor man lay just outside his gate. A great chasm had formed 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 you to pray, but it can also teach you to curse. Furthermore, when Jesus speaks of poverty, it does not necessarily refer to a lack of money or the basic necessities of life. The poor in the Bible are also those who have no abilities, no accomplishments — they live on the fringes of life. They are the outcasts. They are people who are considered by the talented and fortunate as having little or no value.

If you have ever been in a situation where 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 because you could no longer rely on your usual securities. So this poor man, Lazarus, had nothing in life he could count on except for this one thing: the mercy and love of God.

Both Lazarus and the rich man died. The same end comes to everyone — rich, poor, healthy, sick, lucky, or unlucky. Death is the great equalizer.

Now, as mentioned earlier, the tables are turned. Lazarus was in the bosom of Abraham. That's the Bible's way of saying that his suffering was over, and that he was totally with God. But the rich man, to his complete surprise, found himself a long way off. He was in torment. His agony was made worse by the fact that now, for the first time, he sees true paradise. He thought he was in paradise when he had all that wealth before he died. Now he is aware of God, and because of that, he also sees Lazarus there with God, and for the first time, he knows of his separation.

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. You can compare it to a thirsty person who sees a spring of water from which they cannot drink. It makes your thirst even stronger.

In other words, one way of understanding hell is that you can see the glory of God but have no access to it.

In this life, you can hide yourself from your condition — from the fact that you have separated yourself from others. But there comes a time when all you have hidden is revealed.

So the rich man is in torment because he is now aware of how much he has missed in his life. According to the parable, he called out to Abraham, “Father Abraham, send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue.” 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 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 any direction.” When he was alive, the barrier could have been crossed by the rich man. This is a mirror image. The difference is that in life, the gate could be opened and the misery of one assuaged by the other, but now there is no way to cross the great divide.

The rich man, still thinking in terms of privilege, objected. He was used to a world where 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 warn my brothers so they don’t end up here in the same condition that I am.”

Here, the rich man shows some spiritual progress when he thinks of someone else: his five brothers need to be warned so that they might escape his fate. But he’s still thinking of Lazarus as his servant.

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 along. If they don’t listen to the message through the many usual channels, they will not be convinced if someone from the dead should come back to warn them. All the time, this huge chasm has been forming, and you wouldn’t face it. You were too occupied with yourself and with your own selfishness.”

The story makes two main points for you and me in this life today. The first is a warning about chasms or divides that can form between us and others who are different from us: between rich and poor, between black and white, between Jews and Christians and Muslims and Palestinians, between children and parents, sisters and brothers, husband and wife, employers and employees, liberals and conservatives. You can allow yourself to become so separated from others that one day the chasm is so wide that it can no longer be bridged.

I worry about these chasms being formed in the present time. It’s so easy for any one of us or a group to begin to think we have it all, that we deserve it, and that we are right and those who disagree with us are wrong. It’s so easy to begin to believe that you are loved by God more than someone else, and then you begin to dig a chasm between yourself and others.

In one way or another, each one of us has poor Lazarus lying at our door, and we try not to see him. We look away. He’s not easy to look at — covered with sores. It might rub off on you. Every form of segregation you permit begins to form chasms that one day will be difficult to cross. Every time you find it difficult to forgive someone, a chasm begins to form.

Jesus wants you and me to practice and learn to love those who are different from us and to forgive those who have wronged us. He said we are to love our enemies. That’s not easy to

do. One person said to me, “For everybody else’s enemies, I am full of love. But not for my enemies. That’s much more difficult.”

The second point Jesus makes with this parable of the rich man and Lazarus is that each holds the key to the other’s well-being. The rich man has it in his power to feed the poor beggar at his gate, to tend his wounds, to find help for him. But he doesn’t. The wall, the fence, the gate might as well be a great divide that cannot be crossed. So it is equally true that the rich man needs Lazarus. He holds the key to the well-being of the rich man. It benefits everyone to live in a world where gates and walls and fences are not needed, and where they exist, not to be afraid to go through the gates or over the walls and fences. Lazarus needs the rich man to be made whole, and the rich man needs Lazarus to be made whole. The Spirit of God is in each one of them, and that Spirit is most truly experienced when they come into a relationship with each other.

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 are all around you, if you live without compassion and generosity and become hardened and callous, you are helping to create a great divide between yourself and others and between yourself 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. I call them the “L” words: 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.” Societies are always creating chasms between the “first” and the “least” and the “greatest.” As followers of the way, we are continually called to cross these divides.

Do not be afraid to cross the great divides in this life. Here’s a story I’ve used before. There was a congregation in a university city like Lincoln. It wanted to attract more people, especially students from the university, to its worship services. One Palm Sunday, when the church was filled to capacity with regular members all dressed in their Sunday best, a young man appeared, dressed in a sweatshirt, blue jeans, thick socks, and sandals. He was late and couldn’t find a seat. So he walked down the aisle and sat on the floor.

As the congregation watched and held their breath, an older, very distinguished gentleman who was a long-time member of the congregation made his way down the aisle. He carried an Order of Worship, a hymnal, and his cane. Was he going to reprimand the visitor? When he reached the place where the young man was sitting on the floor, slowly and carefully, with the aid of his cane, he lowered himself to the floor to sit next to the young man. Amen.