

Gulf is Crossed

September 25, 2022

Luke 16:19-31

¹⁹“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²²The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’ ²⁵But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. ²⁶Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’ ²⁷He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house — ²⁸for I have five brothers — that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ ²⁹Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ ³⁰He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ ³¹He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’ ”

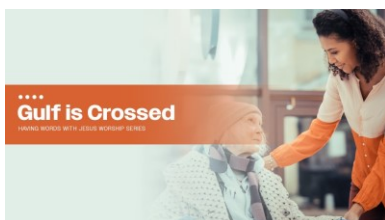
1st Timothy 6:6-19

⁶Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; ⁷for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; ⁸but if we have food and

clothing, we will be content with these. ⁹But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.

¹¹But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. ¹²Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. ¹³In the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you ¹⁴to keep the commandment without spot or blame until the manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁵which he will bring about at the right time — he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords. ¹⁶It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.

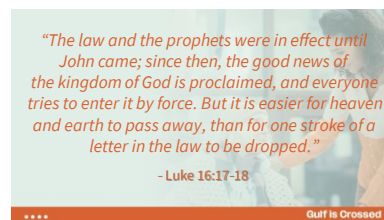
¹⁷As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. ¹⁸They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, ¹⁹thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.



As we wrap up our series, “Hearing Words from Jesus,” we end with the continuation of Jesus’ conversation with the Pharisees.

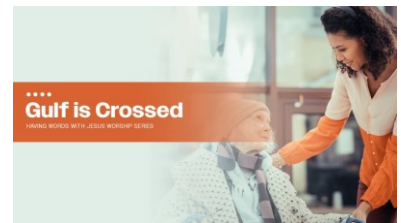
It began with the lost parables and continued with the parable of the shrewd manager. We conclude with the story of the rich man and Lazarus. It is a powerful story of reversal, of the world turned upside down and right side up. The poor are filled with good things and the rich and powerful are sent away hungry. It is a parable told to those who rolled their eyes at Jesus and thought him sadly out of touch with reality. We will also spend some time again in Paul's first letter to Timothy. In today's text, Paul offers great words of hope and encouragement, words that remind us of some of the essentials of our faith. As we prepare to work through these texts this morning, let us pray...

Turn with me to Luke 16 as we begin. This week's lectionary reading from the gospels begins in verse 19. But if we back up a few verses, we can easier connect the dots from last week to this week. In verses 16-17 Jesus says to the Pharisees, *"The law and the prophets were in effect until John came; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is proclaimed, and everyone tries to enter it by force. But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away, than for one stroke of a letter in the law to be dropped."*



Here Jesus is not talking about storming heaven with a big army, fighting one's way in. He is not talking about physical force. No, in verse 16 he is talking about those who think they deserve entrance, about those who thought they would enter heaven because of their status or wealth or deeds. He is talking to and about those who thought they were owed a place in God's kingdom because of their titles or status here on earth.

The Pharisees and religious leaders feel that they deserve or are owed heaven because they keep the letter of the law. Every single law is kept. They judge those who do not hold to their own high standard harshly and critically. It would be easier for heaven and earth to pass away than it would be to alter the Pharisees view of the law. Never mind helping them to understand the intent of the law. Yes, they kept the letter of the law but failed to ever get to the heart of the matter, to the heart of God. Do we ever get like this? Do we ever think ourselves or our way is better than another? Do we ever think or speak poorly of folks who do not see things exactly as we do? In these ways, we create a gulf between ourselves and others. If we do not do these things, then we are much unlike the world around us.



Moving into today's text from Luke 16, we meet the two main characters. One is the rich man, the man who dressed in fine clothes and feasted on delicious food every day. The second is Lazarus, a poor man covered in sores, who sat outside the rich man's door begging for some food. He *"longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table."* This is a scene played out every day in our nation. The homeless and poor struggle to find adequate nutrition each day while many dine on wonderful food, all with plenty to spare. There continues to be a gulf in our nation between the rich and the poor. In our scripture, day after day this scene was played out, poor Lazarus right outside the door of the rich man. Lazarus was so low that even the dogs would come and lick his sores. Now, mind you, these were not like the neighborhood dogs, cute little Scruffy and sweet Muffin.



No, the dogs in Jesus' day were mongrels, not house pets. They were scavengers, much despised by society. Yet even these wild creatures came and cared for Lazarus. They did more for Lazarus than the rich man did for him. Most days, he probably did not even notice that Lazarus was outside his door.

Then, in verse 22, we read that both men died. For Jesus' audience, they would have thought poorly of how the rich man treated Lazarus. After all, caring for the poor was one of the key beliefs of Judaism. But they would still have thought that the rich man went to heaven and that Lazarus went to hell. The Jews believed that those who were blessed were favored by God and those who were not blessed were sinners and were cursed by God. From the Jewish perspective, what Jesus says next would have been shocking, radical even.

The rich man goes to hell, where he is tormented. Looking up, he sees Abraham with Lazarus by his side. The rich man seems surprised to be where he is. In verse 24 he calls out and asks Abraham to *"have mercy on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue."* It is still all about him. The rich man still sees Lazarus as someone below him, as one who should serve him. Abraham, send Lazarus down here to tend to my needs. Abraham, remove Lazarus from heaven and send him to hell, so that I can have a drink. Revealing a shocking role reversal, Abraham answers, *"Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony."*

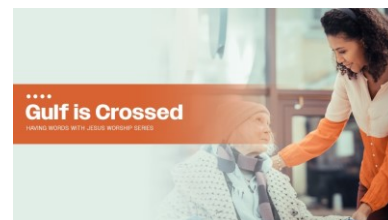
"Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony."

- Luke 16:25

**** Gulf Is Crossed

How many alive today will one day hear this same verdict? How many enjoy life now and pay no attention to or even ignore the needs of those around them?

So, is this parable about the someday realities of heaven or is it a call for justice today? Yes! This is a both/and story. It is about what God has in store for all of creation. While we hold onto the hope to come when Christ returns and makes all things new, we are also called to work to make today look as much like this “one day” promise as we can. To do so, there are gulfs that must be crossed. While life after death is part of this parable, this is not simply the story of heaven. It is much more a call to holy living. It is an invitation to listen to the word of God, to apply it to our lives, and to live as though God’s kingdom was already among us.



Returning to the rich man, we do know that he was not totally selfish and self-absorbed. There was at least some inkling of good in his heart. After all, he tries to negotiate for the saving of his brothers, who are apparently like him – and not once, but twice. First the rich man begs Abraham to send Lazarus to his five brothers. Again, use him to serve me and my brothers. Abraham tells him that they have Moses and the prophets. So did the rich man. He didn't listen. So next the rich man argues that they will believe if 'someone' from the dead comes to them.

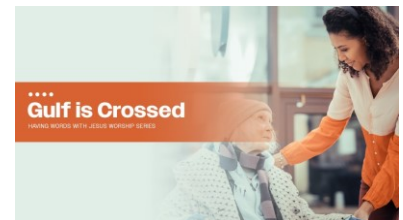
Sadly, Abraham says, *“If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”*



They had their chance, just like the rich man did. And again I wonder, how many will hear the same thing when they unexpectedly find themselves before the throne of judgment and on the wrong side of grace? How many will say, “But Jesus...?”

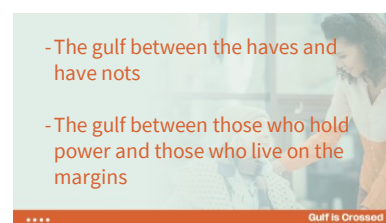
Jesus is, of course, speaking to the near future here too. Specifically, Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees and other religious leaders present that day. They have chosen not to listen the latest prophet, to Jesus. Soon they will choose to not believe that he rose from the dead. Even the empty tomb and resurrection can be dismissed and written off.

In our parable, the question of the rich man’s goodness is not really addressed. The central issue in the story is the gulf between the two main characters. Yes, there is the physical gulf between them in heaven and hell – one that cannot be crossed. But more important to Jesus is the gulf that existed in life, the gulf between the rich and the poor. This gulf continues to create tension and cause problems in our society. And of course economic status is not the only thing that creates gulfs in our land. Religion, ethnicity, politics, and many other factors create gulfs between groups of people. In Rapid City, in Sturgis, in Piedmont – what divides people in our communities? As Christians, what is our response? How do we speak into those gulfs? Who do we lift up in prayer as a way of acknowledging the marginalized and oppressed? What doors do we need to open to welcome a more diverse group into our church? How do we get to know their names?



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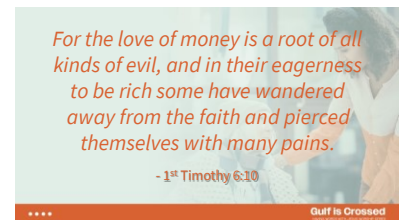
In Jesus' parable, only the poor man is named. The rich man is anonymous. The rich man could be anyone. Jesus naming the poor man and not the rich man is a reversal of norms. It is a shift in the cultural power dynamics. It is Jesus' way of telling his audience and us that the poor matter. In the parable, the gulf between these two men cannot be crossed or fixed in the afterlife. That means it can only be crossed or closed in this life. So Jesus is drawing our attention to the gulfs that exist in our world right now. And even more so, Jesus is calling us to not only notice them but to do something about them. Here are two of the more prominent gulfs that exist in our world today: the gulf between the haves and have nots and the gulf between those who hold power and those who live on the margins.



In raising these concerns, the invitation from Jesus is two-fold. First, how do we close these gaps? Second, how do we cross them? Jesus' answer would be simple: lay down self, pick up your cross, and close the gap. It takes a cross to close the gulfs that exist in our world today.

To develop our understanding of what this looks like to pick up our cross so that we can cross gulfs, turn with me to 1st Timothy 6, verses 6-19. In these verses, Paul warns his readers about materialism. Paul says that the love of money, not money itself, is the root of all kinds of evil. He goes on to state that those obsessed with money build their hopes on shifting sands. Today's parable about a man who has fallen into this very trap.

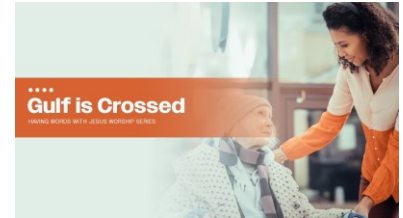
Paul begins our text for today with a summary statement: *“There is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it.”* Today we might say there are no U-hauls behind the hearse. When we are content with who we are and with what we have, we find great joy and peace in this life. Speaking into the dangers of money or wealth, Paul notes that *“those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction.”* This was certainly the case for the rich man in Jesus’ parable. It is the case for many today. Connecting these two thoughts, in verse 10 Paul writes, *“For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.”* I have lived this verse. Perhaps a few of you have too. There have been times in my life when my desire for wealth or possessions have led me down evil paths and have brought me pain and heartache. This is not the way that God intends for us to live.



Leaning into God’s intent for our lives, Paul offers four ways to grow into God’s plan for our lives: put our hope in God, do good, be rich in good deeds, and be willing to share generously. When we do these things, we will be *“storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.”* Here Paul is mirroring Jesus’ guidance that we heard last week. We are to use worldly wealth for building the kingdom and for bringing God the glory.



When we do these things, we are freed from the concerns of this world and are able to live into and through the things of God – joy, peace, hope, justice. Taking hold of the life that really matters, we lay up treasures in the life to come and we live this life in a way that brings us meaning and purpose and contentment. When we put our hope in God, do good, are rich in good deeds, and are willing to share generously, then we begin to be people that live in right relationship with God and to be people that are aligned with God’s heart for others. From this place, we can begin to be people that cross the gulfs that separate us from one another.



Returning to today’s parable in Luke 16, the rich man cannot cross the gulf. It is a chasm fixed between heaven and hell. We have within us the power to determine which side of the chasm we will reside on in eternity. Our profession of faith in Jesus leads to the gift of salvation. Salvation leads to eternal life. Salvation is about making sure that we are right with God. That involves introspection, reflection, confession, and repentance when needed. It also involves loving neighbor as self because can we ever really be in right relationship with God if we are living in broken relationships with others?

We United Methodists like to say that we are in the business of “making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” To make a new disciple we must first be a disciple. To live in right relationship with one another, again, we must first live in right relationship with God. We cannot separate these two ways of living.

If we desire to be people and a church that seeks to transform the world, then we must first see the gulfs that exist in our world, in our nation, and in our communities. To create transformation, we must begin with seeing. So this week, may we first begin to really see the divides that exist in our society.

There are great chasms in our world today. Truth be told, sometimes it feels like we can't cross or close the chasms that exist. Sometimes we think ourselves too small to make a difference or to affect change. We alone are too small. Other times we think we don't have the power to create change or to positively affect circumstances or people's lives. We alone are not that powerful. Sometimes we have no idea where or how to begin to cross or close one of these chasms. We alone are not all-knowing. But we do know one who is big and powerful and all-knowing.

The Pharisees trusted in their own ability, in their own power. They could not see the one who stood before them offering to cross the gulf between their hearts and God's heart. May we not be so stubborn, so prideful, so shortsighted that we fail to see the Christ that offers to walk with us. Yes, we can feel weak. We can be unsure of what steps to take. We can be filled with fear and doubt and worry. But we do not have to walk alone. May God give us eyes to see, a heart to feel, and a spirit willing to walk with love made real, with Jesus Christ. Doing so we will be empowered by Christ's Holy Spirit, walking with the one who is big and powerful and all-knowing, with the one who can transform lives, society, and our world. May it be so for you and for me this week. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. In your life, what gulfs need closed between you and God? What practical steps can you take in the week ahead to close these gulfs?
- 2) *Pray*. Where do you see gaps or gulfs in your community? Pray to discern how God might use you to help close these.
- 3) *Study*. Read Luke 17:1-4. What does Jesus have to say about closing gulfs that have come from sin in our lives or in the lives of those we love?