

“The Great Chasm”

The Practice of Empathy

October 10, 2021

Luke 16

A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie S. Osterhoudt

This morning I am continuing a series of sermons on practicing our faith. Because, faith is not just a set of beliefs but it is a way of life. And I say “practice” because it can be a verb with an ongoing, indefinite future. We will never get it perfect, but as Christians, followers of Jesus Christ, we keep on trying and practicing. Each week I am focusing on one aspect of our Christian life which I believe, according to Jesus, is foundational if we say we are followers of Jesus Christ. This morning my focus is on practicing “empathy.”

Empathy is the ability, at least try, to consider the world from someone else’s perspective– to step into their shoes, so to speak. To use understanding to guide our actions. It is akin to compassion (last week’s sermon focus) but it goes a step further, seeking understanding. Empathy is something that we can gently and consistently nurture and it can become the motivation for radical social transformation.

This morning’s scripture reading is a parable, story, which Jesus shares with his followers, describing empathy and the destructiveness which comes with a lack of empathy. From Luke’s gospel....

Prayer for Understanding

Eternal God, whose will for humankind is that we live within the rule of your love. Call us out of our preoccupation with riches to sense our common plight with all who suffer. Help us to identify with rich and poor alike as your children, that through mutual care and compassion and empathy we might grow toward your eternal realm. May we hear and heed your life changing warnings and promises. Amen.

Let's listen.....

Read Luke 16: 19ff

Several years ago, my sister, her husband and I celebrated my father's birthday with him. We took him to a nice, not fancy, restaurant in Clarkesville, Georgia, close to where he lived in the North Georgia mountains. As we were seated at our table, I glanced over at the table about 10 feet from us and there sat a man, maybe he was in his early 70's, wearing blue jeans and a plaid workman's shirt; a little underdressed for this particular restaurant – but after all, it was North Georgia. His companion was a much younger, very attractive, blond haired woman. I kept looking at him because he looked familiar to me. Suddenly, I knew who he was – Ted Turner, founder of CNN. He owns a home in North Georgia and miles of one of the local rivers where he enjoys trout fishing.

Nobody seated at the table with me believed me. I kept insisting that it was Ted Turner until I asked the waitress to confirm his identity. I was right; everyone seated at the table tried to act like it was not a big deal. So, I asked them who else who was famous had they ever been seated that close to. I felt like we were dining with the rich and famous! I realized how drawn we are to them like a moth buzzing around a light bulb.

My brother-in-law then launched into telling a story about being drawn to that which dazzles or glitters. Once there was a moth for whom life was just a mess. He had lost his job and was desperate to find another one. His daughter was engaged to be married to someone who was only interested in her money. His son had just been placed on academic probation by his college and his wife, well he suspected she had a gambling addiction. His life was a mess. So he decided to seek help and found a podiatrist that he thought might help him. He made an appointment, arrived at the appointed time and sat down opposite the podiatrist in his office. The podiatrist asked Mr. Moth what was the matter and how he might help him. The moth began his long tale of misfortune. When he came to a stop, the podiatrist commented: "Well, that is certainly a full plate of misfortune which you are trying to balance; but I am a podiatrist and I think you really need a psychiatrist. Why in the world did you make an appointment with me?" To which Mr. Moth replied, "well, your light was on." I think the point my brother-in-law was trying to make is that we all tend to be attracted to the things in life which glitter or shine or seem glamorous to us, but they do not help us live

full and happy lives. As JR Tolkien says in his *Lord of the Rings* trilogy: “All that glitters is not gold.” It might be shiny but it is worthless in the long run.

That is precisely the point of this morning’s scripture reading.

Once there was a self-indulgent rich man. Wanting everyone to know that he has a lot of money, he wears the finest clothes, lives in a big house – big enough to have an outer gate encompassing his estate, and he feasts sumptuously every day. He lives a lavish lifestyle; he is one of the rich and famous.

And then there was Lazarus. Lazarus is the only individual with a name in all of Jesus’ parables. So, why did Jesus give him a name? Lazarus is a Hebrew word which literally means, “the one whom God helps”. Lazarus appears at the beginning of this parable to be a person whom God did not help. He was so covered in sores, sick and hungry that the Hebrew reads, he was ‘laid’ at the rich man’s gate – passive tense. Meaning that someone in his family or in the community had to bring him every day to the rich man’s gate, hoping that the rich man would stumble past him and have mercy on him. The rich man literally trips over Lazarus every day, but doesn’t see him.

I recently read an article by a psychologist who identifies six habits of empathetic people. The first habit is curiosity about strangers. Empathetic people will not only see but speak to people around them, out of curiosity – wanting to learn something about them. They find other people interesting and

are not simply self-interested. And, by the way, empathy can be a cure for chronic loneliness.

The second and third habits of empathetic people is to challenge our prejudices, discover our commonalities and try walking in another's shoes. The rich man doesn't bother to even engage Lazarus in conversation, even though he sits at his very gates. Consider our commonalities. Try on another person's life.

The rich man does not show compassion for Lazarus, but the dogs cared for him. Dogs lick their wounds because it has been scientifically proven there is a kind of antibiotic in a dog's saliva. And dogs lick people as a sign of affection. Even the dogs care for Lazarus.

The poor man dies and is carried to heaven by the angels. The rich man dies and is in torment in hell. In the end we all die, rich or poor, male or female, regardless of race or any other humanly divisive factor. There's a commonality. The rich man sees Lazarus in heaven. To our surprise the rich man recognizes him as the sick and hungry person who had laid at his gate day after day; he was acquainted with Lazarus' desperate plight. Ignoring Lazarus once again, the rich man appeals to Abraham. "Hey, bro, we are of the same family tree. Remember me?" No comment of remorse or apology for Lazarus, just an attitude of entitlement, appealing to Abraham. After reminding Abraham of their family connection, the rich man verbalizes the traditional cry of the beggar: "Have mercy on me!" When Lazarus was in pain, the rich man ignored him. Didn't even listen to him – which is the fourth habit of empathetic people – to listen. But

now that the rich man is in pain, well, someone needs to listen to him and something must be done about his plight immediately! The rich man demands services and empathy for himself – send Lazarus down here to give me water- but they are empathy and services he himself is unwilling to offer!

Abraham responds, acknowledging the family connection – “my dear boy.”

Abraham reminds the rich man of four things::

1. You received good things in life – you shaped your life by how you used those blessings.
2. Lazarus had bad things happen to him in life, and you paid him no mind.
3. Now Lazarus is comforted. In part because you did not show him comfort. You had enough, if not more, to have cared for Lazarus.
4. You are now in anguish; you created a great chasm and Lazarus could not come to you if he wanted. Do not blame God for where you are in life or death. Do not, do not blame God or others for where you are in life. We tend to blame others rather than accepting responsibility for our own choices and behaviors. Its an easy diversion that rarely brings us satisfaction or joy.

What we do with the good gifts of life and the pain of life is what matters. The rich man responded to the good things in his life with self-indulgence, and indifference to the needs of others, arrogance and class pride. Now think about

that message when you walk out these sanctuary doors. This parable is not a sweet parable, but a challenge to the decisions we make in life. In life, the rich man refused God's help. He had money and managed his affairs alone. In hell, he begs to become the One Whom God Helps, but it is too late.

It is not money that is evil, but the choices we make with what has been given to us. We are merely stewards of our treasures – Jesus tries to warn us over and over again. If we have money, Jesus clearly tells us that we must be socially responsible. The fifth habit of empathetic people is to use your empathy for social change – do something – reach out – to help the people at your gate who need you. Imagine a different world for them and for you – that is habit number six. That is what it means to be a Christian; we are called to care for the sick and the hungry lying at our gates. Period. End of discussion. The rich man in this parable uses his resources for his own self-indulgent living and there will come a day and hour when he will be held accountable. Abraham Heschel, that wonderful Jewish writer says, “God is not indifferent to evil. The rich man apparently thought he was.”

There is the story about a man who dies and goes to the afterlife. In one room that he is shown, people are in misery. They look emaciated even though they are sitting at tables load with food. There is silence and hallow looking eyes staring at him. The dead man asks the angel who is showing him around why the people are so emaciated when it appears that they have plenty of food on their tables. The angel explains that they have spoons tied to their hands and the

spoons are too long to be able to put food into their mouths. The newly deceased man was then shown a second room – identical to the first room he saw. But in this room the people appeared happy and well fed. Laughter rose around the same table laden with food. The people had the very same long spoons tied to their hands. The dead man quizzed the angel: “Why are these people happy and content and well fed even though they are in the very same condition as the people I saw in the first room?” The angle responds: “Because in the second room the people have figured out how to be compassionate and feed each other.” Great Chasms. We create them. But there is an alternate way of living. It’s up to us. Our choice.