

“A Great Chasm” / Luke 16:19-31 / 29 September 2013

“Between you and us,” Father Abraham says, “a great chasm has been fixed.” You don’t hear that word “chasm” every day. What do you think of when you hear it? I guess my only image for a chasm is the ugly, unreclaimed strip mines that used to spread like scars across so much of Western Pennsylvania in the 1970s, when I was a kid. My brothers and I used to play in those chasms. There was typically dark, murky water at the bottom of those chasms, and we were foolish enough to jump into it, to swim, and hide, and pick elderberries. But people were always falling into those chasms, too, drowning, getting injured, dying. A chasm is an ugly thing. It’s a gash that breaks the wholeness of a place...and there are chasms aplenty in our world today. I don’t mean strip mines, though there are probably too many of those, too. I mean the steep, invisible chasms that divide our hearts, and our souls, our spirits, our society. I mean the chasms that keep us away from other people and—yes—away even from our own best selves. “Between you and us a great chasm has been fixed.”

At a prestigious private university, a professor was teaching a masters level course in management and human resources. When it came time for the final exam, he said to his class, “We’ve been together now for about four months, and I hope you’ve learned that ‘human resources’ is about people, not profit. It means discovering people’s skills and strengths, then plugging them into those jobs where they can find the most satisfaction and do the best work for your organization. It’s about knowing your people. If you’ve learned that lesson, then I have served you well. So, for your final exam, you have two choices. You can take the full length test; it’s mostly essay and multiple choice. It will take you about an hour and a half to complete. Or, you can write on a sheet of paper your name...and the name of the woman who cleans the restrooms and the classrooms right here in our department.” The students looked at each other in complete embarrassment. The professor looked around the room and said, “Okay, I know what you’ve thinking: her last name is pretty hard to pronounce, so I’ll settle for just her first name.” More awkward silence, then the teacher said, “C’mon, people, the woman wears a name-tag!” The students just stared at their desks; no one made eye contact with the increasingly annoyed professor. “What? Wait. You mean to tell me that all of you want careers working with people, managing human beings, you’ve been in this class for four months, in fact, you’ve been students in this department for several years, but you never bothered to learn the name of the lady who smiles at you politely and cleans up your messes? You don’t know that she’s a single mother with twin boys in high school, that she’s saving up to put both kids into the community college across town? You never knew that she rides the bus to work and takes in laundry to make ends meet?”

Finally, feeling a little browbeaten by the professor’s smugness and his moral superiority, one student raised her hand and said, “We might not know her name, but it’s not like she doesn’t matter to us. I mean, if we saw her having a heart attack, we would, call, like, 911 and stuff.” The professor smiled sadly and began handing out the test. He said, “Well, here are your final exams, they’re four pages long. But I want you to know that if you had learned your most important lesson, you would have had not four pages to write, but four letters: R-O-S-A. Rosa. The cleaning lady is named Rosa.”

Oh, those chasms that are built into our world! If you want to discover a few chasms in your life, then reread today’s newspaper paying especially close attention to the articles that you skipped. Most of them tell of misfortunes faraway, floods in Pakistan

and pirates off the coast of Tanzania. It's not that you don't care; it's just that we don't have it in us to care about everything all at once. It's not that we don't care; it's just that something has to make front-page news to really capture our sympathies, like the recent terrorist attacks in Kenya. There are chasms in our heads, chasms in our hearts, chasms between people who will never really do see each other. Those chasms stand gaping and dark; they isolate us from one another, and at times they separate us from the people we really ought to be. There are chasms in our spirits that keep us from believing. There are chasms in our emotions that keep us from loving. Those chasms leave us standing on their steep, gravelly edges all alone, afraid that we might fall. There are chasms between Muslims and Christians, chasms between the many different flavors of Christian, chasms between the sexes, between generations, between liberals and conservatives. You might never even guess the great, unseen chasms that stretch their open mouths between two people who sit side-by-side on the couch every night...the chasms of history, and secrecy, and old misunderstandings. Something there is in this world that loves to dig a chasm. Race, and class, and incomes, and education; these have all fixed a deep divide between Rosa and those graduate students working toward their MBA. They don't wish her any harm; they don't hate her or even feel especially superior to her. They just don't see her. The same forces have fixed their vast chasm between the rich man and Lazarus. It's a chasm both in this life and the next.

I read recently about a homeless man who struggled with mental illness. People carefully averted their eyes whenever they walked past him in the streets, and so he truly came to believe that he was literally invisible. He believed this until one day when a street preacher pushed an evangelistic tract into his hand. In astonishment, he asked the man, "So, can you really see me? Can everyone see me, or just you?" Think of the people in the world who go through their days feeling largely invisible. Consider, too, all those seemingly invisible people who wake up one day and force you to see them! As a good and beautiful example, isn't that what the Civil Rights Movement was? As an awful and ugly example, isn't that what terrorism is? Indeed, in the life of our world, aren't more and more people rising up and demanding at last to be seen, to be recognized, to be respected? But not so for poor old Lazarus, the beggar who sits outside the rich man's gates and begs.

Church tradition has named the rich man "Dives," and of course he sees the beggar sitting at his gates. You can't miss the guy; he's picked a spot where people will notice him. Maybe on his better days Dives drops a spare coin into Lazarus' dented tin cup. It could be that the sight of Lazarus, with his sores and his rags, causes the Dives to feel genuine pity every once in a while. The sight of Lazarus might even make Dives ponder that age-old question of social responsibility, the role of government, and the so-called safety net. Who knows? All we know is that, in this parable, there is a chasm between the two men. Even though they're neighbors, they live in separate universes. And then in the next life, when Dives truly sees Lazarus as a fellow son of Abraham, when Dives turns to Lazarus for help, there is yet another kind of chasm between them. Or perhaps it's just the same old chasm, but now it's become unbridgeable. Whatever Jesus' message in the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, whatever he's saying about wealth, and generosity, and the poor, he's definitely telling us to build bridges over our chasms. Build bridges while we still can!

Ah, bridges! We Pittsburghers know about bridges! They say we have more of them than any city in the world: bridges over the Mon, the Allegheny, the Ohio, and some might even count the Yawk. We've got beautiful bridges and ugly bridges. We've got high bridges and low bridges—some so low that you couldn't float a four-story-tall rubber ducky beneath them. We've got old bridges and...well, mostly just old bridges. We've got bridges that previous generations had the civic-mindedness to construct, but that our current generation lacks the civic-mindedness to maintain. We have bridges.

But money can't be the kind of bridge that I'm talking about. Now, Jesus' call to responsible living, perhaps even frugal living, is clear. And his call to be generous toward the poor is just as clear. But money is just a tool; it's not a real bridge between people. In fact, fewer things can dig a chasm deeper than money—like money lent to a relative or friend. No, there is really only one bridge over the chasms of our world, and it is also the same bridge that can span the many chasms of our private lives; it is relationship. Genuine relationship alone can get us cross the big divide.

I like the little bit of foreshadowing where Father Abraham tells Dives that those who don't believe the Scriptures of Moses won't believe even if someone rises from the dead. It's clearly a reference to the resurrection of Jesus. But it seems to imply that even our ability to believe something has more to do with our relationships than it has to do with Scripture or reason. I had an uncle who was a devout Roman Catholic. He had gotten divorced early on and married a Protestant; on Sunday mornings, the wife took her kids and went her own church, while my uncle took his and went to the Catholic parish that he had attended all his life. Because he was never granted an annulment of his previous marriage, my uncle was barred from Holy Communion, but he still served on the Building and Grounds Committee. He attended Mass every week and stayed in the pew while his three sons slipped past him and marched up to receive the Sacrament. This man was a true Catholic, and all the exclusion in the world couldn't keep him away from his Roman faith. After thirty years of fidelity to a church that no longer fully accepted him, my uncle underwent serious surgery. He called the priest to ask for a visit either before or even after his surgery. It never happened. He had truly become invisible to the church that he'd served for over fifty years. In the meantime, people from his wife's church were visiting, sending cards, putting his name on the prayer list. As soon as my uncle recovered from surgery, of course, he switched churches, which was an enormous step after all these years. Now, I'm not saying that Protestants are better than Catholics about caring for the ill. It could just as easily have gone the other way. (Given the choice between Roman Catholicism and the type of Protestant that my aunt was, I would have tended Catholic myself!) But I am saying that kind and loving relationships can cause us to have faith, and indifferent or uncaring relationships can cause us to lose it. Belief has less to do with reason, or Scripture, or tradition than with how we're treated. Even belief is about relationships with other people. In fact, this was the topic of the Women's Retreat last week: "How do we talk about our faith without sounding like crazy Christians?" The answer they reached, I believe, was, "With kindness and respect." If people are good to us, if people construct bridges of kindness across the chasms that separate us, then we just might consider crossing over and joining them.

Oh, the chasms of the heart, the deep dissatisfactions of the soul, the great divides that haunt our daily lives; we give them wide berths because we fear falling in. But all our fear, pain, and loneliness, too, are bridged by the cultivation of real and intentional

relationship with God and, yes, with other people. It's said that when Marie Antoinette felt her world unraveling, when the beggars at her gate turned into hungry, angry mobs who surrounded her palace on the eve of the French Revolution—people who had been merely invisible to the aristocracy for so many years—when these impoverished wretches began to make themselves visible and known, Marie Antoinette tried to purchase huge tracts of land in the valley of the Susquehanna River, in hopes of escaping to the brand new state of Pennsylvania, where her life of ease could continue in safety. But we all know that she never made it here to the New World. She paid the price most dearly for her inability to see and sympathize with the miserable poor at the gates of her palace. Relationship!

The dispossessed stand outside the gates still today, angry that we haven't factored them into our plans. And people who feel invisible can take drastic measures, for they are powerless. Bridging the chasm is entirely up to us, the powerful. Like Marie, that hapless queen in her powdered wig, we cannot run from them. Nor can we beat them down and make them remain invisible; Afghanistan has shown us that. In places where we think we've chastened them, like North Korea, we've learned that the memories of old hurts run very deep, and they can spring up in ugly new ways. We cannot make them go away. Their world is as different from ours as Dives' world was from that of Lazarus. But Dives' sin wasn't being rich. His sin was his refusal to see needs of the world just beyond his door. His sin was his simple refusal to be in relationship with the beggar.

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, some sociologists suggested that the only way to make the Islamic world stop hating Americans is to invite many more Muslims into the country, on student and tourist visas, so they could form relationships with Americans. I don't know if that's the solution, but at least those sociologists understood the real problem: Where there is no relationship, people build false ideas about each other. Some people hate foreigners until they get a wonderful, caring Indian doctor. Some people hate homosexuals until a beloved family member comes out of the closet. Relationship!

How will we cultivate real relationship in the troubled places of our life and our world? Some will inflate a four-story tall duck and float it down the river as a symbol of the fact that we're all bathing in the same water. Whatever we choose to do, it must be done with love and respect. Will you bridge the great chasm that is fixed between you and the one who feels invisible to you? It can be done. It is done everyday in some very surprising ways. A whole new world is waiting to be born. Cross the chasm! Where will you begin? How will you start? Amen.