

Convinced  
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I remember seeing an ad, years ago, in Vogue magazine. It was a beautifully photographed shot of an elegant woman and a man in a rowboat. They were being attacked by a shark, and the woman was using one of her shoes (with 4 inch heels) to beat it away. It was a bit mystifying: I couldn't figure out what the ad was for. The shoe? The woman's hair? Something the man was wearing? The make up? Turns out, the ad was for her handbag, which was lying at the bottom of the little boat. Appearances are deceptive. And, I wondered, does buying the handbag mean that you will be attacked by a shark? Still, there was something compelling about the ad, something about elegance and excitement, and one can be sucked into thinking that what is pictured is somehow desirable.

Then there are the pharmaceutical commercials. One might show a child running through a meadow of flowers, a handsome couple dancing in a kitchen, and a fit high school coach with his team. The message: how good your life will be if you take this medication. Just imagine how wonderful it will be! We are so easily convinced by those images. Then in a soothing, but speedy, undertone, comes the litany of side effects and warnings: do not take this medication if you are pregnant or nursing; and it may cause heart irregularities, nausea, headaches, anxiety, insomnia, etc., etc., etc. It takes some concentration, but it's a pretty good idea to listen to those warnings. They may change you from convinced to terrified. We are persuadable beings, but sometimes some reflection is needed to sort out fact from fiction.

Today's Gospel reading is definitely fiction...but it is useful fiction, I think, as parables often are. It paints images for us, not to give us a factual picture, but to get us started down the reflective road.

Jesus did not tell parables to retell history or to give a complete theological system. He gave us glimpses, sometimes shocking or surprising glimpses, into the Kingdom of God. He gave us various facets of "divine logic": of the way God surprises us with mercy and compassion. So put away the idea that this parable explains how we get to heaven, or some sort of afterlife topography. It invites us to look around and see people here and now from the perspective of that odd divine logic.

Jesus was not the original composer of this rich man/poor man folktale/parable. It had its roots in ancient Egypt, and various versions show up in Jewish sources as well. In the rabbinic tales, Abraham's nephew Eleazer (the Hebrew version of Lazarus) goes walking around in disguise on earth and reports back to Abraham about how his descendants are observing the Laws regarding good treatment of the widow, the orphan, and the destitute. So we should not be surprised that Jesus uses this pre-existing folktale to tell us about God's overwhelming compassion for a poor man, and that he adds details to emphasize the extreme nature of what is at stake. We are persuadable, but we are also distractible, and, at times we need to re-focus on the God's eye view of justice and mercy.

The set-up: an anonymous rich man – and not just rich, but dressing and eating with conspicuous consumption – and a named poor man – and not just poor, but cast aside, hungry, covered with sores. Within the set-up is the first surprise: Jesus dignifies Lazarus with a name, the only named person in any parable. So we are already on a first-name basis with someone whom we would rather not look at, especially with those dogs prowling around. The location is a gate. Gates are for passing through...and, gates are for keeping shut. Gates give a person a choice...at least the person who is the owner of the gate. And, as far as we can tell, the rich man passed through without looking down at the mess at his feet, otherwise known as Lazarus.

But we don't spend long in the set-up; we don't linger at the gate. In a single verse, both men die. Briefly we hear their respective fates. The poor man is carried by angels to the bosom of Abraham (as the older translations say – to Abraham's lap) where he is comforted. The rich man is buried, and now resides in Hades – not a place in the Jewish afterlife, but borrowed from the surrounding Greek culture. There was an ancient belief that the righteous and the wicked could see each other after death, and that is played out here. The rich man sees Lazarus, but chooses to speak with Abraham, his "father" or ancestor. And here we see how clueless the rich man really is.

He asks for mercy, when perhaps he should start with regret. He asks for water, when perhaps he should ask for life. Even in the torment of Hades he still thinks Lazarus is like a servant: "Father Abraham, send me that boy! Water boy, come here! I need a sip of cool water, step quickly now!" Then, when that does not work, he suggests another task for Lazarus: "Send him to my father's house – I have 5 brothers, and he can warn them, so that they don't come to suffer here." The rich man has not received the memo, apparently: the suffering of Lazarus, and any work he may have done for you, are long over.

Abraham speaks with wisdom about our habits of indifference, our ways of learning, what convinces us. He names this truth: "We have Moses and the prophets; we should listen to them." Even if someone were to come back from the dead – of course foreshadowing the death and resurrection of a particular "someone" here – even then, some people will choose not to listen. Some people will choose indifference, focusing instead on the clothing of "purple and fine linen" and the sumptuous daily feasts.

The parable is teaching us about gateways of understanding, here and now. It is teaching us about chasms of understanding, here and now. Though the gateway of opportunity presented itself to the rich man in life, he treated it like a chasm of indifference. Worse still, he may have been convinced that the structure of his life was pre-ordained, thinking that he deserved to feast every day, that his very wealth was a sign of God's favor. This was not an idea confined to the ancient world: good Christian folk have interpreted their good fortune in exactly this way all through the centuries. The lovely hymn, *All Things Bright and Beautiful*, written in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, has a verse that does not appear in our hymnal:

*The rich man in his castle,  
The poor man at his gate,  
God made them high and lowly,  
And ordered their estate.  
All things bright and beautiful.....*

Hello? I don't think so, not since I read the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. It is not beautiful to say that the poor man at the gate was placed there and should stay there. Some may have been convinced that this was true, as it made it easier to live in the castle. It made it easier to go in and out the gate without looking down.

When we read this parable as a story of here and now, instead as a warning about the afterlife, we see the chasm that yawns between us, the chasm that blinds us to the humanity of another, the chasm made of fear, or indifference, or disgust, or entitlement. It is a dehumanizing chasm, and it shapes our perspective. It helps us to forget that God gives life, that God is incarnate in human need and human love. Jesus warns us that wealth and status can fuel our indifference, widen the chasm, shut the gate.

And we know, from our own experience, that chasms form not only between rich and poor, but over political differences, over religious customs, over access to education. This compelling image, this great ditch or divide, is the one that give the parable its power, and gives us our calling. We have Moses and the prophets, we have the voice of one who continues to persuade, the one rose from the dead. And so, convinced and inspired and called, we open the gate and cross the chasm here and now.

Every time one of us volunteers at the Haven, the chasm narrows.  
Every time one of us cook for the Good Neighbor Health Clinic, or for a LISTEN Community Dinner, another chasm becomes a little easier to cross.  
Every time we travel to the Dominican Republic to build a house in a village, or to North Carolina to work on an African American Church, another chasm becomes less important.  
Every time we help with the start up of Dismas House in Hartford, another chasm becomes less daunting.

Here is the good news: in this life we can indeed cross the divides that separate us. Abraham's wisdom invites us to remember the one put to death for caring for the poor, for daring to forgive sins, for announcing divine mercy for all, for healing the outcast, for challenging unjust authority. We have the compelling, convincing voice from the other side reminding us that our neighbor is just on the other side of the gate, and that it is in our power to open and walk through. Thank God for that mercy, thank God for that voice, thank God for that neighbor, who opens my eyes to our shared humanity. Amen.