


“Boundaries”

Sunday, September 25, 2016

18th Sunday after Pentecost

 **(Luke 16:19-31, NRSV)**

The Rich Man and Lazarus

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores.

The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried.

In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He 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.’*

But 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. Besides 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.’*

He said, *‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house – for I have five brothers – that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’*

Abraham replied, *‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’*

He said, *‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’*

He 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.’”*

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God.

[2nd Service: *Affirmation of Faith*]

[MESSAGE]

Luke brings us a story today where Jesus is once again speaking to a group of Pharisees and trying to help them better understand what God expects.

It is a story unique to Luke's Gospel that has been the source of much debate concerning what happens when we die.

Who goes where?

It has also caused many people to wonder: Who are we supposed to be in this parable?

The Rich Man? Lazarus?

I suggest that we are cast as those five siblings of the rich man who are still alive.

I also suggest that this story has more to do with **BOUNDARIES** than it has to do with heaven and hell.

Let us pray...Lord, as we approach your holy word, help us to move past any obstacles to our understanding. We seek to understand better what

it is that you expect from us in this life. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

This is one of those parables that seems vaguely familiar, but is not really one that we hear all that often.

We get several themes from the story.

We hear a distinct call about sharing what we have with others.

Poor Lazarus has suffered for years because the Rich Man has passed him by, offering no help.

In the end, the Rich Man suffers while Lazarus rests in Paradise.

Apparently, Jesus intends this to be part of his larger teaching on the evils of loving money more than people and the ways in which we often abuse our blessings.

We are also reminded that the time will come when our choice about God is finalized.

This apocalyptic message is a wake-up call as it pulls back the curtain on eternity so that we may see clearly.

When he was alive the Rich Man didn't see poor Lazarus at the gate.

That's an important detail: it's not that he **ignored** Lazarus; the great sin is that he **didn't even notice**.

We are wise to consider what we notice and what we choose not to see.

There is a real sense of urgency in this story; act now before time runs out.

I think the theme we each pull from this story depends a lot on who we see ourselves as in the cast.

I'd like for us to imagine today that we are one of those five siblings.

We have life ahead of us.

We have lots of opportunity to pay attention to the Gospel.

We have Moses and the Prophets.

We have the Scriptures.

We have the lessons of God's economy and God's care for the poor and needy.

We have the example of Jesus.

So, why do I come to this story through the image of

BOUNDARIES?

To begin Abraham describes the "great chasm" that exists between Paradise and Hades.

Nobody can move between these two.

Once we've reached our final destination there are ***NO "DO-OVERS"***.

When the Rich Man asks for help for his brothers, Abraham says they have all they need and of the choose to ignore it's their own fault.

This speaks of the kind of boundaries we build for ourselves that keep us away from God.

Things like: greed, stubbornness, and selfishness.

Our self-imposed boundaries block us from receiving all that God has in mind for us.

Abraham shows the Rich Man that he had every advantage, every opportunity and yet he failed.

His wealth, comfort, and social position served as boundaries that blocked his vision.

These boundaries were so strong that he didn't even notice the most obvious need that existed right on his doorstep, in his own neighborhood.

Abraham's words sting because they prove that the Rich Man has no one to blame but himself for his current predicament.

As I began to explore this image more I wondered about the boundaries we build between us and others **AND** how those boundaries may also serve to block others from access to Jesus they should see through us.

In his poem, "*Mending Wall*," Robert Frost tells the story of two men who meet each year, on neighborly terms, to rebuild the wall that separates their two properties.

They do this annual chore out of habit, tradition.

Neither man has livestock at risk of roaming.

They both grow trees in no danger of walking across the line.

Frost talks to us about separation and the barriers we build between us.

He talks about the futility of placing such boundaries.

He laments our persistence in this activity.

This is how I came to think about how this story is really a warning to us against putting up so many **BOUNDARIES**.

It is said that, “good fences make good neighbors.”

I am not convinced that’s true.

Fences, walls, boundaries – divide us, separate us, and alienate us.

Boundaries have started more wars than any other factor.

Separation has bred racism, mistrust, and violence.

Boundaries continue to define our differences and hide our commonalities.

I get it: there is something about us that likes those clearly defined boundaries of what's my place and what's yours.

The problem I see with this idea is that it not only divides us, it also causes us to make judgements and valuations based on what is ours and what belongs to the other.

These judgements only work to divide us further and chasms grow that may be irreparable in the long run.

One thing we notice here is that, even though the Rich Man is confronted with the reality of what his boundaries have caused, he still doesn't get it.

He still views Lazarus as an inferior; he still doesn't notice him as a human being of value.

"Send him to me" to bring water for my comfort.

"Send him to my brothers" to warn them yet again.

Lazarus is simply another tool for the Rich Man to use to his own advantage.

How does that play-out in our own culture today?

It seems that our human nature wants us to be a little self-absorbed.

We learn from infancy to seek provision for our own needs and wants.

As we grow up we learn a lot about getting and keeping stuff; we learn also about keeping OUR stuff away from others.

Some of this training is healthy self-preservation and some of it goes beyond the basics of getting what we need.

Our Christian nature seeks to temper our perceptions by including the “*OTHER*” in our line of sight.

Jesus asks us to **notice** others and help them also have what they need.

Jesus wants us to recognize that, although some will always have more, everyone is deserving of what they need to live a good life.

Jesus shows us that we can live together without the walls between us that we seem to feel comfortable living behind.



That, I think, is much of the message that Jesus has offered to the Pharisees all along.

It isn't necessary to build barriers that set some people apart from or above other people.

God's plan has always been for harmonious and loving relationships that notice **NO BOUNDARIES** between individuals.

Perhaps the boundaries and walls we have built are, not so much between us and others, as between us and God.

When we separate ourselves from God it is easy to see how we can drift into being separated from other people too.

It is God's love that empowers us to love others and live as Jesus showed us.

When we stop noticing that, we are sure to stop noticing God's people.

We are getting in the way of the God within us.

Frost ends his poem with this:

*“Before I built a wall I’d ask to know what I
was walling in or walling out.”*

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the
Holy Spirit. **Amen.**