

The Chasm

Some will hear today's gospel and think: "oh my gosh, is that what life after death is really like?" People in heaven watching people in hell fry?

One of the dangers of what is called a "literal" reading of the Bible is to come to conclusions like that. But reading the Bible that way misses the richness and depth of truth that Jesus gets at in his different parables.

As we will see, today's gospel is not about Jesus giving us a preview of what life after death is like. So for those who might be wondering how anyone could be at peace in heaven with a bird's-eye view of those tormented in hell; you can exhale. That's not the point of the story. This story is for the living, not the dead.

Today's gospel is often called "Lazarus and the Rich Man". But it could just as well be called "The Six Brothers". In those days, just like these days, to be rich is to be seen by others as especially blessed by God. It seems to run through us as naturally as blood. To "have" is proof of God's love. To be poor, to "have not", is seen as a curse.

"God helps those who help themselves", Ben Franklin said; we say. If not out loud, then to ourselves... We say that, but Jesus doesn't.

All year so far we have been chest deep in the gospel of Luke. And Luke takes us on the road with Jesus, as he travels from his hometown of Nazareth (the town that rejected him) to the capital city of Jerusalem (the city that will crucify him). The lessons we hear every week this year are lessons taught on that road that begins with rejection and ends with execution.

On that long journey, Jesus points out, over and over, all the things that separate us from one another, that separate us

from God. The seemingly impassible chasms between rich and poor, saint and sinner, men and women, Jews and gentiles.

Closing those chasms is another way of saying “The Kingdom of God is near.”

Yet, those chasms remain, and with each passing day, in our politics, in international relations, in interfaith efforts, it seems these chasms only grow deeper, larger, more impassible.

The gospel lesson today begs us to close the gaps; begs us to reach out; and begs us to relax, to rest in the love of God, and to embrace each other.

How do we get there? Part of it is to remember who we are; to come again to the question: “What is a Christian?” “What does a Christian do?”

To say one is a Christian in today’s world is too often to say: “I accept Jesus as my personal savior,” end of story. But while that acceptance is key, it is still only the first step, only the open front door; but it is by no means the end of the story.

Sadly, today’s so-called Christianity is often a sorry caricature of the faith Jesus so patiently, so creatively, so persistently, lived, as he walked from rejection to execution.

An evangelical friend of mine was going on and on the other day about how God blesses his people with Lear jets and fantastic bank accounts. The gospel of Luke, today’s lesson of the six brothers, tells a very different story indeed.

What passes for Christianity today too often divides God’s people into this, the elect, and this, the damned. Judgments are made that sound good to human values, but which repudiate gospel values. The Christianity of too many today opts for a few hot button political issues (usually involving sex or gender), forgetting the more urgent calls of justice and compassion.

That kind of one-dimensional faith is nothing new. 2500 years ago, Isaiah railed against that very same excuse for faith: “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen ... to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked to clothe him, and not turn away your own flesh and blood?”

Moses instructed the newly freed slaves, fresh from their flight from Egypt: “If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight fisted toward your poor brother. Rather, be open-handed and freely lend him whatever he needs.”

God really does care about us. All of us. Right here. Right now.

And so we have the story of the 6 brothers. One died. Five remain. The one who died lived very well indeed. He wipes his food soaked hands on slices of bread. The bread is tossed under the table. Then, gathered up, and tossed into the street, where the dogs are waiting, where Lazarus is laying.

The brother who died, he heard Moses; he heard Isaiah; he heard. But he didn't listen. So he asks for a warning back to his five brothers. Five brothers who live now as he did. Five brothers who desperately need to change. Five brothers who have what we have: Moses and Isaiah, and for us, even more, Jesus.

Five brothers who didn't notice the chasm between themselves and the poor. Five brothers who didn't notice the chasm between themselves and women; themselves and gentiles, themselves and God. And the story ends with the unspoken question hanging in the air: Will the five change? Will they? Will you? Will I?

In the last few hundred years, but especially in the last hundred, we who claim the faith of Christianity have moved

far from a faith focused on the greater good, and toward a faith of the “lonely individual, bent on a quest for personal salvation.” [Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 257]. That’s what “make Jesus my personal savior” is all about: me!

But that is not the gospel of Jesus Christ. Thank God that is not the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is a call to radical friendship with the least, and even with the most despicable, among us. Not pie in the sky in the sweet by and by, but today, now, here.

Our faith calls us to reach out to Muslims, even to the ones who wish us harm; to reach out to the immigrant, even those here illegally; to reach out to the rejected, even those who have caused their own rejection.

This is the glory of our faith! This is the largeness of our faith! This is the hope of the Kingdom of God, even now, pressing in on our world.

Let me leave you with this, a sort of modern day story of the 6 brothers and the chasm. It’s the story of a Nazi and a Jew and in their story is the reconciling power of Jesus Christ.

“The story comes from Lincoln, Nebraska. On a Sunday morning in June 1991, Cantor Michael Weisser and his wife Julie were unpacking boxes in their new home, when the phone rang. “You will be sorry you ever moved into Randolph St., Jew boy,” the voice said, and hung up. Two days later, the Weissers received a manila packet in the mail. “The KKK is watching you, scum,” read the note. Inside were pictures of Adolph Hitler, caricatures of Jews with hooked noses, blacks with gorilla heads, and graphic depictions of dead blacks and Jews.

The Weissers called the police, who said it looked like the work of Larry Trapp, a state leader, or “grand dragon”, of the Ku Klux Klan. A Nazi sympathizer, he led a cadre of skinheads

and klansmen responsible for terrorizing black, Jewish and Asian families in Nebraska and nearby Iowa. "He's dangerous," the police warned. "We know he makes explosives." Although confined to a wheelchair because of late stage diabetes, Trapp, 44, was a suspect in the fire bombings of several African-Americans' homes around Lincoln and was responsible for what he called "Operation Gooks", the March 1991 burning of the Indochinese Assistance Center in Omaha. And Trapp was planning to blow up the synagogue where Michael Weisser was the spiritual leader.

Trapp lived alone in a drab efficiency apartment. On one wall he kept a large Nazi flag and a double life-sized picture of Hitler. Next to these hung his white Klan robe, with its red belt and hood. He kept assault rifles, pistols, and shotguns within easy reach for the day when his enemies would burst into his apartment to kill him. In the rear was a secret bunker he'd built for the coming "race wars."

When Trapp launched a white supremacist TV series on a local cable channel—featuring men and women saluting a burning swastika and firing automatic weapons, Michael Weisser was incensed. He called Trapp's KKK hotline and left a message on the answering machine. "Larry", he said, "do you know the very first laws Hitler passed were against people like yourself who had no legs, or who had physical deformities or physical handicaps? Do you realize you would have been among the first to die under Hitler? Why do you love the Nazis so much?" Then he hung up.

Weisser continued the calls to the machine. Then one day, Trapp picked up. "What do you want?" he shouted. "I just want to talk to you," Weisser said. "You black?" Trapp demanded. "Jewish", Weisser replied. "Stop harassing me," said Trapp, who demanded to know why he was calling.

"Well", said Weisser, remembering advice his wife had given him, "I was thinking you might need a hand with something, and I wondered if I could help. I know you're in a wheelchair

and I thought maybe I could take you to the grocery store or something.”

Trapp was too stunned to speak. Then he cleared his throat. “That’s okay”, he said, “I’ve got that covered. Thanks anyway. But don’t call this number anymore.” “I’ll be in touch,” Weisser replied. During a later call, Trapp admitted he was “rethinking a few things.” But then he went back on the radio spewing the same old hatreds. Furious, Weisser picked up the phone. “It’s clear to me you’re not rethinking anything at all! After calling Trapp a “liar” and a “hypocrite” Weisser demanded an explanation.

In a surprisingly tremulous voice, Trapp said: “I’m sorry I did that. I’ve been talking like that all my life...I can’t help it...I’ll apologize!” That evening, the cantor led his congregation in prayer for the grand dragon.

The next evening the phone rang at the Weissers’ home. “I want to get out,” Trapp said, “but I don’t know how.” The Weissers offered to go over to Trapps that night and to “break bread.” When the Weissers entered the small apartment, Trapp burst into tears and tugged off his two swastika rings. Soon, all three were crying, then laughing, then hugging.

Trapp resigned from all his racist organizations and wrote apologies to the many people he had threatened or abused. When, a few months later, Trapp learned he had less than a year to live, the Weissers invited him to move into their two bedroom, three-children home. When his condition deteriorated, Julie quit her job as a nurse to care for him, sometimes all night. Six months later he converted to Judaism; three months after that he died.” [Wink, *The Powers that Be*, 172-5].

We each of us have chasms to cross. Shall we begin?

+amen.

