



MIND THE GAP

September 29, 2019, Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 16:19-31

Kimberly L. Clayton, The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

Though some scholars think this parable was originally a folk tale from Egypt that made its way to Palestine, I think of it more like Kabuki Japanese theater. Kabuki is characterized by its elaborately designed costumes, eye-catching make-up, outlandish wigs and the exaggerated actions of its performers. The kabuki stage often has a revolving platform and trapdoors, allowing dramatic entrances and exits.¹ That seems about right for this story Jesus told. It sets in exaggerated form two main characters—a rich man who dressed every day in haute couture—wearing purple, the most expensive dye available; a color worn only by permission of Roman authorities, signifying that its wearer was of the grand and elite in the empire. This man was so rich he feasted every single day on sumptuous food; the menu most enjoyed once a year on a special holiday. He lived at an exclusive address. Not only did he likely have a doorman, why, his house was its own gated community—a cul-de-sac of one.

Outside of his gate, a poor man named Lazarus lay hungry and sick every day. The rags he wore were not even worth mentioning; instead he is described as covered in sores. Lazarus longed to eat what fell from the rich man's table, but that gate, and so much else marked well the distance between them. His only solace came when the dogs of the street licked his sores.

What caricatures! What exaggeration for dramatic effect! Kabuki at its best. Then, suddenly, a trap door opens downstage and Lazarus dies into it. Next, a trap door opens upstage and the rich man dies, too. Then the stage platform revolves in a dizzying spin. Their fortunes are reversed. The poor man is carried away by angels



to heaven where father Abraham dwells. The rich man, the story notes, was buried. Maybe it was an elaborate funeral, but that was the last fuss anyone made over him. He winds up in Hades, tormented by flames. And tormented, too, by the perpetual view his change of address offers: The great father Abraham high above, comforting none other than Lazarus against his chest.

The exaggerated form of the story continues. The rich man has trouble adjusting to this change of fortune. Calling out to Abraham, he orders, “Send ol’ Lazarus to dip his finger in some water and cool off my tongue! I’m so hot and parched from these flames.”

Abraham explains that Lazarus’ days of being ordered around are over. That the great chasm between them is fixed for all time. But a lifetime of issuing orders is a hard habit to break. “Well, then Abraham,” the formerly rich man yells next across the abyss: “at least send Lazarus on an errand for me. I have five brothers still living. Send him over there to warn them to be nicer to people and to help the poor so at least my kin don’t end up here, too.” “No.” Abraham replied. “They’ve had plenty of warning their whole life. Just as you did. It’s all clearly laid out through the whole Bible. If they won’t listen to Moses and the prophets now, someone coming back from the dead isn’t going to convince them either.”

Whenever Jesus begins a parable with these words: “There once was a rich man...” we know things are not going to go well—for the rich man. It is not that Jesus thought wealthy people were inherently bad or deserved condemnation. Nor did Jesus condemn money in and of itself. Instead, Jesus spoke often of what greed, the love of possessions, and the comforts of privilege can do to us. How the pursuit of money can command our time, energy, and devotion—and I use that word purposefully. How the acquisition and preservation of money can become an idol, the thing in which we place our ultimate trust. And Jesus did not think it was only the fabulously well to do who faced this challenge, but all of us who have enough to live comfortably self-sufficient. Jesus knew that having money can actually make us less generous, not more. How it affords us the opportunity to shield ourselves from the way so many others must live...those who are poor—especially



those desperately poor. As time and distance grows, we cannot imagine what their lives are like. Perhaps a degree of fear or judgment creeps in as we regard them. Our ability to feel empathy wanes.

A Mennonite pastor wrote an article recently about a class he and another pastor named Lauren were planning to teach. It was to be held at a maximum-security prison in North Carolina. The two pastors were waiting in the chaplain's office. He had to sign an authorization for the 3-month class to take place. The course would include a group of seminarians and a group of inmates. It was to be held in a cinder block room deep within the prison. The theme of the course was Spiritual Autobiography. Through readings and assignments and writing exercises, the seminarians and the inmates, students together, would share stories about their lives: episodes from childhood both painful and joyful—they would write together about their lives and their faith.

The chaplain came in and told the two pastors that before he would sign off on their paperwork, he needed to tell them some important things. “The most important thing you need to know,” he boomed, as if speaking from a pulpit, “you need to understand that they’re not like us. They don’t think like us. They don’t have the same kind of mind that we do. They’re criminals. They’re corrupted. I’ve been here 20 years and I’ve seen it all. Before you go in there, you gotta know they are not like us. Repeat after me: *they are not like us.*”

The two pastors glanced at each other. They didn’t know what to do. They didn’t want to say it. Raising his voice, the chaplain commanded them again: “Say it, *they are not like us.* ... You can’t go in there unless you say it. *They are not like us.*” The two pastors exchanged a look again, each giving the other permission to say what they did not believe so that the chaplain would let them teach the class. They mumbled, “*They are not like us.*” “Louder,” the chaplain demanded. They repeated it once more. “Again,” he demanded. The pastor, who was a Mennonite, says in the article that one of the most important articles of faith for Mennonites is to speak the truth. To speak the truth even if it costs you your life—which it did indeed cost many in that faith tradition centuries ago. Sitting in that chaplain’s office, he said,



it felt like they were denying their faith; they were making a false confession; they were betraying Jesus. Ironically, they did it so they could share their faith.

The pastor goes on to describe the three months those seminarians and inmates spent together, sharing their stories and their faith. How they ended the class getting permission, over the chaplain's head, to bring homemade casseroles and enjoy a feast on the last day. It was over that meal that one of the inmates told of a fight that broke out at the prison years ago. The chaplain suffered severe blows and had been had been, the inmate said, possessed by fear ever since.ⁱⁱ

It is quite easy, you see, to make caricatures of people on both sides of almost any issue or circumstance. To play the extremes for dramatic and polarizing effect. But surely Jesus tells this parable not for cartoonish effect. And not to set us at the extremes of division. The real attention, I think, is at the center of the story where Abraham describes "the great chasm that is fixed." There does come a point, I suppose, at which the great chasm is indeed fixed...by fear or by hardness of heart. Or simply from willful neglect and time's erosion. Time to live otherwise has run out.

But we are like those five brothers. We have today. We are alive today, together here in church, with a Bible chock-full of teachings about our responsibility to care for the poor. Jesus tells us this story to remind us that we know better and can do better, and the time is now. While the great chasm is not yet fixed. When crossing from here to there and there to here is still possible. We can see now, really take notice now of the person or persons in need, and not look away. We can open ourselves to understand their lives and learn their stories, not making assumptions or being possessed by fear. And we can tell them our stories, too; share our lives as well. Given the disparities, the needs so evident nearby and far away, we can reassess our relationship to money, continually making sure that having it makes us more generous, not less.

When Abraham speaks to the rich man, that caricature of avarice and conspicuous consumption, look again at what he calls him in verse 25: "Child..." In Luke 2,



Mary and Joseph were frantically searching for their son, 12-year-old Jesus, when they found him in the temple. Taking hold of him, they said, “Child, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety...” And in the parable of the lost son(s), the desperate entreaty the father makes to his older son is this, “Child, you are always with me and what is mine is yours...”

God anxiously searches for us, searches our hearts...God comes to us even if we have cut ourselves off from God...God reaches across the greatest chasm, “Child...” The rich man, a child of Abraham, a child of God. Lazarus, too, God’s beloved “Child.” *We* carved the chasm, not God...it becomes fixed by our actions and by our inaction. Who knows? There may still be time.

One day I stood behind a wall in the church hallway. The wall had a small window opening. A homeless man came by. He asked to borrow a stapler. I happened to be holding a stapler, but I did not give it to him. Instead, I looked at him, pretty street-wise after years in urban ministry, and wondered if he might use it somehow as a weapon? I saw no papers in his hands that needed stapling. “Why do you want a stapler?” I asked from the great chasm between us...my privilege and his poverty. My power; his helplessness. He looked down, humbled in his need. I held onto what he asked for. Then he said quietly, “It is cold outside, and...” he looked down, took hold of his pant leg, its seam unraveled from his thigh to his ankle.

Ah, then it was I who was humbled, ashamed. I handed him the stapler from my side of the wall. He took it, bent down, and began stapling his pant leg; a slim protection against the bitter cold outside and within my own heart. If the great chasm is already fixed, then Father Abraham will point to that day in my life. But usually, Jesus tells a story so we have time to change our hearts and our lives.

Brick Church offers a lot of opportunities to spend time with, get to know, share stories and even a banquet with those we too often ignore, overlook, and misunderstand. Come be part of it when you can, while you can. The Wednesday Night Dinner Program is just one example. Bring your child or grandchild along, too, so they experience the scriptures, faith in action. Be generous in supporting the



missions and ministries that close the gap. *They are like us. We are like them. All of us, children of God.*

Amen.

ⁱ For a description of Kabuki theater: <https://www.japan-guide.com/e/e2090.html>

ⁱⁱ Isaac S. Villegas, “Where love is contraband,” in *The Christian Century*, September 25, 2019, pp.30-33.