

“Mind the Gap”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

Luke 16:19-31

March 26, 2017

Fourth Sunday in Lent

We are almost as far from Halloween as we could possibly be, but this morning’s gospel passage has me thinking about haunted houses. Not your run-of-the-mill haunted houses, with ghosts and zombies and monsters. I’m thinking about “hell houses.” Hell houses first popped up in the late 70s, but really took off in the mid 90s era of evangelical Christianity.

A hell house is like a haunted house, but instead of ghouls and vampires, it’s populated by people who have sinned in the eyes of the fire and brimstone church that is operating the house. Visitors walk through a series of scenes that all end in horror. A man chooses to be gay, is diagnosed with AIDS, and dies painfully and alone. A woman has an abortion, and bleeds to death. A teen does drugs and crashes a car and kills a family. A young adult gets involved with sinister atheists, which leads to Satanic worship and human sacrifice. A man declines getting “saved” by an evangelist and ends up tortured by demons. The last scene is generally a depiction of heaven, with an opportunity to invite Jesus into your hear and avoid all that gore and violence.

Yikes! This kind of manipulative, fear-based moralizing is terrible theology, and the antithesis of everything we preach and teach here. But I thought of these hell houses because this parable reminded me of a conversation I had in the Youth Room a couple of Halloweens ago. The youth, Lindsey, and I got into a fun discussion of what an “Edgewood Presbyterian Hell House” would look like: teenagers who turned their backs on LGBTQ friends, adults who failed to treat with respect a person with a disability, pastors who spewed hateful messages full of racism and misogyny, and people of means who failed to notice the poor. Mwahahahaha!

How heartbreaking it is that our version would be considered less terrifying. That last scene is what Jesus gives us in this parable. It starts like any of his other parables: “There was a rich man...” He dressed in expensive purple clothing and this man was the kind of man who did not simply *eat* meals. No, he feasted! Sumptuously! Every day. He is living a life of opulence. Imagine, if you can, such a wealthy man. Do you see him? I know it might be hard right now, but try. See the rich man.

And then see poor Lazarus. He ached for a feast of crumbs from the rich man’s table. He was covered in sores that the dogs would come and lick. We are meant to be repulsed by the description. Before we know what happens next, we’re already backing away from Lazarus. See these two men, and then remember that you are in the gospel of Luke and that it is Jesus who is speaking and you have a pretty good idea that things are about to get turned upside-down.

Lazarus died, and he was “carried away by the angels.” Imagine that for a second. A filthy beggar covered in sores, being carried by angels. I bet Lazarus had never been carried by anyone, never treated with such care. Maybe you have heard of urban churches that provide foot cleaning and care for the

homeless. Angels dressed like nurses wash feet, clip toenails, attend to any medical issues, and provide clean socks. The rich man was buried and ended up being tormented in Hades. He saw father Abraham, far away. The rich man spotted poor Lazarus and asked Abraham to send Lazarus to cool his tongue.

We discover here that the rich man knew Lazarus's name. Depending on how you count, Jesus told somewhere between thirty and fifty unique parables in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. They're all about a woman, or a man, or a sower, or a vineyard owner, or a shepherd. Only in this parable - and it only appears in Luke — does a character in a parable get a name. I think it's significant that the beggar with the sores gets a name from Jesus. And it tells us something that the unnamed rich man knew that name to be Lazarus. This isn't the Lazarus who Jesus raises from the dead in the gospel of John. They share a name, and that name, in both its Greek and Hebrew forms, means something like "one that God has helped."

The rich man hadn't simply been blind to the poor. He wasn't ignorant of the inequality. He had seen the man at his gate — seen his sores and known his name. Maybe you've heard a pithy parable somewhere about the value of knowing the name of the person who cleans the bathroom, or takes out the trash. Of course, that's true. But it would appear that for Jesus, simply knowing their name isn't enough.

Abraham replied, "Child," — such care from Father Abraham — "during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus...evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. ...between you and us a great chasm has been fixed." The rich man begs for Lazarus to be sent to warn his family, but Abraham points out that they've had a couple thousand years of warnings from God's prophets, and if they wouldn't listen to them, well, a person raised from the dead won't change their mind. And we hear "a person raised from the dead" as Luke's listeners did, knowing it's not really about Lazarus.

A great chasm has been fixed. Christian writer and founder of *Sojourners* magazine, Jim Wallis, tells the story of being in seminary and watching a friend take an X-ACTO knife to an old Bible, cutting out every single reference to the poor. The resulting Bible was in shreds. Tatters. It was falling apart. It turns out that Biblical references to wealth, poverty, and justice outnumber references to hell by a ratio of 14:1. Wallis would take that hole-y Bible out to preach and tell congregations, "this is our American Bible."

A great chasm has been fixed. Our government and our lectionary seem to be in cahoots these past few months. We get a warning about the great chasm being fixed between the poor carried by angels and the rich who did nothing to help them, and it comes on the heels of a hell house of a healthcare bill and just a week after the first glance at a budget that seems to take glee in widening the chasm, afterlife consequences be damned. I know you know all of this, but to recap:

Under the proposed budget, funding would be cut or eliminated for international aid that helps the poor, college scholarships for the poor, after school programs for the poor, job programs for the poor, housing programs for the poor, utility assistance programs for the poor, and food programs for the poor. If we care to think with some complexity, scientific research funding for health and the environment is connected to the future of the poor and how we interact with them and is, of course, cut or eliminated. In

exchange, we would get a wall to protect us from the poor and a lot more bombs to drop on the poor. And to be clear, it's not as if we've been doing a great job with the poor before this proposal.

Next Sunday, we'll be showing you the Edgewood 2017 budget. I was taught in seminary that a church budget is a theological document. It shows what a congregation values. I hate to give spoilers, and I also hesitate to give some good news when I've got a good rant going, but your Session has again committed to sending ten per cent of what comes in out the door to help people. And that doesn't account for all the funds that we give through special offerings and events. This congregation continues to be a leader in this presbytery in mission giving.

If a budget is a theological document, the one created in Washington widens an already great chasm. But that's easy pickings, isn't it? It's pretty clear that our elected leaders would not think much of this story. Jesus was not, after all, a lawyer or a businessman. He didn't know how to make deals. And he got captured. He failed to make Israel great again.

Okay, but that really is too easy. It's easy to sit here and say "all those people, those in power, they don't care about the poor." We already know that. We talk about it all the time. But we've got to remember which side of the chasm we're on ourselves. What are we doing about the gap between our lives and the lives of those with whom God seems to be awfully concerned?

Time and time again in the gospel of Luke, we find that what you do with your material wealth is a barometer of your spiritual health. Just in this parable, it would seem that God has a pretty clear outlook on these matters. A great chasm has been fixed, and it wasn't made by God, was it?

When I was a seminary intern serving Lincoln Park Presbyterian Church in 2005, I got to go down to Chicago City Hall and watch my supervisor get grilled by lawyers representing a group of neighbors who were suing the church. The Lincoln Park Community Shelter had been housed in the basement for two decades, and when a successful fundraising effort led to exciting renovations, the neighbors freaked out. Their sincere suggestion was that the homeless children of God be gathered up and bused out to a warehouse in an industrial area on the west side of the city. In the end, the city ruled in favor of the church and its shelter. But I can't shake the feeling that a great chasm was fixed.

Last Saturday, about twenty of our folks joined with our friends at Southminster Pres to pack over 20,000 meals for Rise Against Hunger. Our Men's Bible Study group has been reading about the work of Partners In Health in the abject poverty of Haiti, a nation this congregation has sent food and support and actual helping hands to over the past decade. I firmly believe that most people of faith yearn to close the gap.

But it's hard. It's hard to say "maybe I have enough." It's hard to sacrifice. And it's even harder to get closer. We see the sores and we hear the dogs and we're overcome by the smell. And we want to get away from that gate and go find the feast. And we can hear the rich man hollering from the hell of this parable: "Listen to the prophets! Be changed by someone who rises from the dead!"

This congregation is brutally honest with itself about the reality of the world. We refuse to live in fear, and we refuse to pretend everything is awesome all of the time. We also don't use words and phrases like "abomination" and "affront to God" much. The great chasm in humanity between the haves and the have-nots, between the sumptuous feasts and the beggars for crumbs, this is an affront to God. This is abomination. This is sin. This is a world in need of repentance - of turning, of mind-changing, of new thinking.

As we back away from the gate in search of the feast, let's remember what we said at the start of this Lenten journey to the cross: this trip will be hard, there will be stones along the way. The stones will mark the path to Jerusalem. The stones might trip us up. As Stacey sang that first Sunday in Lent, "I'll put a pebble in my shoe, and watch me walk." As we back away from the gate, we remember that the true feast is prepared by Christ, who leaves the powerful to go in search of the hungry. May we continue to follow him - the one who stands in the breach, who crosses the chasms we build. Amen.