

Sermon for Pentecost 16 Year C 2025
The Chasm

Exclusive communities,
country clubs,
membership dues,
railroad tracks,
border walls,
the other side of town.
There always seems to be a gate between the rich and the poor.
And so it is in today's gospel.

On one side of the gate a rich man lives in splendor.
He's well dressed in expensive clothes.
He sits at his table and feasts every day.
A poor man named Lazarus lays on the other side of the gate.
He's dressed in sores and dog spit.
He's hungry.
He would gladly eat the scraps that fall from the table
but the table is on the rich man's side of the gate.

Here in the US, poverty is defined for a single individual—
that is one Lazarus—as an annual income of less than \$13,590.
For our government, that is the gate
that separates the rich man from Lazarus.
By that standard, I am a rich person.
What about you?
Are you a rich man or rich woman?
And how do you feel about today's gospel
and what happens to the rich man?
It makes me feel a bit twitchy and anxious.
And I guess it should.

This parable is supposed to make us twitchy and anxious.
But not for the reasons you might think.

I don't believe this gospel is about an arbitrary dollar amount that separates the rich from the poor.
And I don't think it means the poor go straight to heaven and the rich all go to hell.
It isn't about rewarding the poor and punishing the rich
Nor is it about those of us who have an annual income greater than \$13,590 are destined for torment and the agony of flames simply because of our income.
Frankly, there might be other reasons for that but income is not one of them.

If I'm wrong about that and it is as simple as a dollar amount, then the solution is clear.
We just reduce our annual income to the poverty level.
Anyone in favor of that?
No?
Me either.
I don't think it's that simple.
Besides, the world doesn't need more poverty.
So, no, today's gospel is not about what will happen to us after we die.

Now before you breathe a sigh of relief,
let me tell you what I do believe this parable is about.
Today's gospel is about how we live today.
Jesus is telling us that how we live today has consequences for tomorrow, not just for ourselves but for others too.
Jesus is asking us, regardless of our income,
to face the poverty in ourselves and in the world.

Lazarus doesn't just represent poverty in the world,
he also represents the rich man's impoverishment.
It's probably one of the reasons why we set gates between the rich and the poor.
We don't want to look in the eyes of Lazarus and see ourselves.

If we did, if we ever truly saw impoverishment in the world and in ourselves, it would ask something of us.

It's the whole point of the moment in Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* when the Ghost of Christmas Present reveals the two children hiding under his robe.

The Ghost tells Scrooge their names are Want and Ignorance and that across their brows is spelled the word Doom.

No sooner has Scrooge seen these two impoverished children than he tells the Ghost to cover them up, he doesn't want to see them.

And the Ghost replies, "I thought as much."

Keep the gate closed.

Out of sight.

Out of mind.

Our choices of what we choose to see have consequences.

Our priorities set a direction for where we are headed.

Our values and actions shape what is becoming of us.

If choose not to see poverty and impoverishment in others, we will live blind to our own doom.

Isn't that what we behold in the rich man of today's parable?

Jesus is warning us that today's gates become tomorrow's chasms.

At some point the gates we use to shut out parts of ourselves or to exclude others become the chasm that confines and isolates us.

The chasm that now separates the rich man from Lazarus is not new.

It has been around for many centuries—even longer than the time of Charles Dickens and the time of the first telling of this parable.

It's not God's judgment or punishment of the rich man.

It's always been there.

It's a part of the rich man and a reflection of his impoverishment.

The chasm is another version or manifestation of the gate that separated Lazarus from the rich man.

The gate and the chasm are the same thing.

Look at all the ways we set gates between ourselves and others—
Between rich and poor
The powerful and the powerless
Black and white
Gay and straight
Muslim and Christian
Immigrant and citizen
Neighbor and enemy
Male and female
Or any other category you might add to this list.
Those gates are there because of the condition of the human heart.
The gate that becomes a chasm always exists within us
before it exists between us.
It is a symptom of our impoverishment.

It seems that the rich man isn't as well off
as he dresses and eats or looks and acts.
Maybe we aren't either.
What if the rich man would have opened his gate to Lazarus?
What if we did?

What if we open the gates of compassion and concern for others,
generosity and sharing,
healing and wholeness,
forgiveness and reconciliation,
justice and peace,
vulnerability and love?
What if we took this parable to heart?
What would it mean for our lives and the way we see and live today?

Well, I suspect, it would change the way we pray,
how we care for one another,
the depth of our relationships,
the significance of our lives,
what we hope for the future . . . not just for ourselves but for others.

Look at your life and the world.

What are the closed gates you find there?

What gates are separating us from one another?

What is impoverishing our life together today?

It might be fear, anger, resentment, jealousy, indifference, guilt, grief, old wounds, loneliness, cynicism, prejudice, or a thousand other things.

All these gates that can become chasms that prevent us from experiencing true wealth and abundance.

They keep us from who God created us to be and blind us from our true worth and the true worth of all who are created in God's image.

What gates does Hasbrouck Heights, this congregation, our country need to open in order to prevent the doom of a chasm from swallowing us up?

Because, let me tell you something that is often overlooked.

This parable was told for the benefit of the rich man's sisters and brothers—that would be us.

For our reclamation,

for our salvation to be lived out in the here and now.

This parable is a reminder that we are called to be Christ's hands and feet and voice in the world.

Lazarus is at the gate. Do you see him? Can you hear him knocking?

Oh, did I tell you what the name Lazarus means?

It means, "God has helped."

It is God's work, but our hands.

Amen.