What is the Great Chasm?

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and 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.’”

What is the great chasm that Abraham refers to? He said, “between you and us a great chasm has been fixed.” Yes, he is speaking from the afterlife here, but that chasm was there long before the two men died and it didn’t change after death. The poor man, the one whose name has been remembered – Lazarus - lived basically on the doorstep of the rich man and yet he was not ever really seen by the rich man. Rev. Scott Bader-Saye wrote, “This text presents us with the great moral challenge of seeing, and then making visible, the invisible suffering of the world.” Even after death, the rich man doesn’t ever talk directly to Lazarus – he always refers to Lazarus in the third person – and the rich man also has the presumption to tell Abraham to have Lazarus come serve him; to wit: Abraham responds by calling him a child. After that the rich man did learn enough to start calling Abraham “Father”, perhaps he was hoping for an inheritance.

No, this chasm in the afterlife is the same one brought with them from their lives. This chasm had not been fixed by God – because Jesus had the ability to travel to hell, and heaven and back to earth again – so the ‘fix-ed-ness’ had nothing to do with the physical laws of the afterlife, but with the human barriers which we fix upon ourselves.

Those brought up poor and uneducated also suffer from the misguided assumption that they are different than those who are raised in prosperity. They also have a chasm to overcome. When people help each other, one does not feel alone and hopeless, then it is possible to overcome the sense of worthlessness that poverty can bring. But that is a hard lesson to learn when so much of our society is based on commerce. The commercials have to emphasize that if you buy this product instead of the other you will be a better person – a happier person. So much of the way of life is focused on what you can purchase, and if you can’t purchase things, you aren’t of value.

This great chasm in the afterlife and on this earth is the belief that there is anything separating us, one from the other. This is a game that we play with ourselves, it is denial that, “there but for some fluke of nature go I” with everyone on this earth.

The rich man could walk right by Lazarus and be thoroughly unmoved because he had built an image of himself that somehow he was different than Lazarus in ways that were truly meaningful. He felt he deserved all that wealth and Lazarus did not. He was worthy of purple and fine linen and sumptuous meals, and he wasn’t even concerned with this poor man who would have been content with the man’s scraps. He believed there was absolutely no human connection between that poor man suffering at his gate and himself.

The rich man did show some compassion in the end – for his likeness – for his brothers - but he did that in life as well. I’m sure he was a generous man while living - with the people he chose to be generous with – those he knew and felt he could trust – those he felt were worthy of his attention and offerings.

Theologian G. Penny Nixon wrote, “There is no escaping this indictment. Those who help create the economic divide by greed and selfishness will not be able to right it for themselves in any other life than this one. This is a parable urging ‘the haves’ to do justice now, for there will be no opportunity later.”

Now this parable is being told by Jesus himself, and we are all under the assumption that Jesus knew what was in store for him – that he knew he would have the ability and the possibility to return from the dead as the rich man had requested, and yet, he
gives the story a twist. The rich man requested that Lazarus return from the dead to warn his brothers. Well, if they didn’t believe Moses and the prophets, why on earth would they believe a poor man whom they ignored while he lived? They probably wouldn’t even recognize him! No, Jesus had Abraham saying, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’ Jesus said that.

Odd, one could almost forget that it was Jesus telling this story. It was almost as if it really was Abraham talking, but it was Jesus telling a story. Jesus, who was greater than all the prophets, who was the son of God, realized that this human tendency to deny the difficult truth that we are all related to each other and the concerns of the one are the concerns of all; would be ignored by some even after his own resurrection.

Helen Montgomery DeBevoise wrote, “Who is this Christ? In Matthew 25, Jesus tells us he is Lazarus: He is that one lying at our door hungry and thirsty. He is that one imprisoned and cut off from ‘decent’ society. He is the marginalized one that you can just as easily walk by. That is God’s Christ who stands at our wall, knocking.”

And it isn’t just a money distribution issue – it is a compassion issue. Lazarus and so many like him throughout history have not been looked at, have been ignored. To quote Scott Bader-Saye again, “Our global network of communication allows us to be more aware of the world’s suffering than ever before, but we have become adept at ignoring the suffering that is right at our doorstep. Maybe, in fact, these two things are connected; the more we become voyeurs upon the faraway sufferings of others, the more impotent we feel to do anything about pain and injustice. Despair and cynicism tempt us to close our eyes to suffering and shut down our overloaded sympathies.”

Rev. Bader-Scott then quotes Augustine reflecting his attraction to tragedies. “In the capacity of spectator one welcomes sad feelings; in fact, the sadness itself is the pleasure. How real is the mercy evoked by fictional dramas? The listener is not moved to offer help, but merely invited to feel sorrow.” Could this be what happens to us when overwhelmed with the pain and injustice of others? Are we so sensitive to it that our protective defense mechanism builds up ways to avoid looking for long? How do we overcome these tendencies and not get overwhelmed by the sorrow in the world?

That, I believe, is why we call Jesus our Savior. He is able to touch, heal, love, teach, save those who could see him for who he was and still is. For those who can see him for who he is – be they rich or poor, he has what we all need. And for those who need nothing earthly from him, he offers a mystical power to love unconditionally without feeling overwhelmed by the pain of the suffering. We can be so filled with the assurance and power of faith that we become his Disciples, his followers.

We gather together in faith and fill up on the hope that gives us strength to face another day of our own sorrow or those of others. And that saves us from the blindness that can kill a world seeking peace. Jesus as Savior – saves us from the agony and torment of seeing what we could have done on this earth but we did not because we chose to create a chasm between us and other parts of this world.

“I believe, O Lord, help me in my unbelief,” could mean “I can see the pain of my neighbor, Lord, help to deal with my desire to turn away and to do what I can.”

In Bible Study we have just begun the Prologue to the Book, ‘Living Inside Out; Learning How To Pray The Serenity Prayer’. The full prayer goes like this:

God give us grace to accept with serenity things that cannot be changed; courage to change things that should be changed; and wisdom to distinguish the one from the other. Living one day at a time; enjoying one moment at a time; accepting hardships as the pathway to peace.

Taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it. Trusting that He will make all things right if I surrender to His will. That I may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with Him forever in the next. Amen.

It is a little different in its fullness than the three lined verse we normally know so well. There is pain in this world – and sometimes we are in it, sometimes we are observers – but we cannot avoid it. When we try to avoid the pain, we aren’t accepting the pathway to peace. When we try to close our special little world off from the pain of others, we are inviting a world of torment in some fashion eventually. The only true answer is to trust in God that we can let go and surrender ourselves to being one with God and one with each other. Being reasonably happy is a lot in the face of all the Lazarus’ in this world.

Amen