

# **Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

## **A GREAT GULF FIXED**

**Luke 16:19-31**

## **Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 21)**

### **Analysis by Paul Jaster**

19There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. 20And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, 21who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. 22The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. 23In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. 24He 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.' 25But 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. 26Besides 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.' 27He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house—28for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.' 29Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.' 30He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they

will repent.' 31He 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.'"

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## **DIAGNOSIS: A Great Gulf Fixed**

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Woefully Divided***

The rich man and Lazarus are woefully divided. The "healthy" rich man feasted sumptuously every day on food and Torah. That's what Pharisees did at their meals; they discussed Torah in the time-honored, Hellenistic, educated fashion by hospitable talk around the table. In the mindset of the day, it took festive, leisurely meals (thus wealth) to be educated in the Torah. Meals were education. And education costs as is evidenced by the "great symposium" that begins in Luke 14 (Dennis S. Smith, from *Symposium to Eucharist*, Fortress 2003). Meanwhile, the sickly, weak and malnourished Lazarus lay outside the rich man's gate longing to satisfy his aching belly with the table scraps that fell from the rich man's table. He did not have the strength, literacy, property or the right associations to discuss properly or fulfill adequately the requirements of the Torah (which is precisely why the Pharisees were so careful to separate themselves from poor sinners and others at table fellowship). For isn't that what the Torah requires socially, especially at temple and the table—careful separation of the holy and the profane? And doesn't the name Pharisee mean "separatist," those who are among the most fastidious in separating themselves from those who don't observe "Moses and the prophets"—the Torah in its broadest, most progressive sense. And wasn't such observation commanded by God (Psalm 133)? And isn't this the very Christian virtue we try to instill in our children whenever we say, "Be careful who you play with. Pick your friends well." We want to build a social boundary around them, surround them

with positive influences and keep the riff raff distant. We consider this a vital part of their “religious” upbringing. And in America, most of us have the luxury of being selective, very selective. Most of us are far richer than we think. Just plug your income level into [www.globalrichlist.com](http://www.globalrichlist.com) and it will show you whether you stand closer to Lazarus or the rich man economically and socially. And economics determines the society we hang with and the society we don’t keep—in church as well as at home.

**Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Blissfully Oblivious***

The rich man is blissfully oblivious to the woeful division between himself and God reflected in the woeful division between himself and Lazarus, because the God of Jesus Christ hangs with poor sinners and Jesus himself is present in the hungry, thirsty, strange, naked, sick, and imprisoned (Matthew 25). The rich man’s education in Moses and the prophets convinced him that his wealth was a sign of God’s blessing and that the poor man’s pitiful condition was a sign of God’s disfavor, and that God’s generous blessing was a result of his obedience to Torah as God has promised. The rich man knows that he and Lazarus are woefully divided. He just thinks the woe belongs to Lazarus and the blessing belongs to him. If the rich man follows the true pattern of a Pharisee, he also tithes, gives generous alms, deposits money in the temple for the benefit of the needy, and has tons of pity for the poor. Perhaps he even gives Lazarus the scraps that fall from his table (nothing in the story says he doesn’t and Lutherans always put the best construction on everything, don’t they?). But pity is not yet compassion—a suffering with. Nor is it the warm and welcoming hospitality that is the true attitude and action that the Torah demands. Nor is it a faithful recognition that God/Christ is present in the other, especially the poor and outcast. Nor, is it the full

communion God desires to have with all creatures. This blissful obliviousness, we have, too. And without faith in Jesus, we must have it. We must be blissfully oblivious. Otherwise it is too painful! Too painful to see the huge gap between the rich and poor...and the ugly wounds that every economic system inflicts...and our complicity in it because we are part of the system...and the full distance between us and God that all our divisions and separations express. Our brokenness with God reflects itself in brokenness with each other. Even the most pious and generous among us is trapped in a moral, economic, theological system that distinguishes and separates between rich and poor, good and evil, the blessed and the pitiful, the pious and the impious, the insiders and the outsiders, the well and the wounded.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : A Great Gulf Fixed**

The rich man is blissfully oblivious to the woeful distance between himself and God reflected in his separation from Lazarus until he dies and is buried. Then tables are turned (just as Mary says in Luke 1:51-53) and he is the one far distant from the bosom of Abraham, in Hades being tormented. By then, however, it is too late. "Between you and us a great chasm has been fixed," Abraham says. Permanently, as in "eternally." That's the law. A law of nature. And God's law, too. The collapse of the 35W bridge in Minneapolis is a vivid image of what happens when we depend on our self-justifying interpretations of Moses and the prophets to bridge the distance between us and God like the rich man did (Luke 16:15-17). The bridge collapses under the weight of a sin and a guilt it cannot bear. And people die as a result of it. Permanently , eternally. Even if we are aware of our faults and flaws and are in the process of patching it up and putting it in the best condition possible. All bridges built or designed by our engineering collapse or are torn down eventually. All of them. Not a single one lasts. Even in the throes of Hades, full of a much more

sober self-awareness, the rich man still treats Lazarus like a lackey: "Father Abraham, ...send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames." There is no heavenly mercy for such a plea. After death, the die is cast and the time for receiving God's mercy through faith and repentance is over. By then, you are either the heir and recipient of God's eternal kingdom or you are not. There is no middle ground—only a great chasm between heaven and hell, which cannot be crossed.

## **PROGNOSIS: A Great Gulf "Fixed"**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : A Great Gulf Bridged**

Except it has been crossed, both ways, by Christ. The impossible happens. What Abraham said could not happen ("no one can cross from there to us" and vice versa) has happened in the cross of Christ. Christ became "the servant" and the "lackey" who crossed from heaven into the agonizing torment we deserve to bridge the gap and touch our mercy-craving tongues with the refreshing water of Holy Baptism. He comes, dies, rises, returns to God, and sends his Spirit (a full round trip and more) so that God's people have more than just the law and promises of Moses and the prophets. They have the good news of the promises fulfilled and the law done in Christ. (Note the sharp oppositional contrast between the "law and prophets" and the "good news of the kingdom of God" in Luke 16:16. These are two very different things and not a continuation of the same.) Jesus comes and is not just a finger dipped in water but the very "font," the flowing source, of a Gospel word that is received by faith alone and not by dazzling signs. And one does not need to be a person of means to receive it. In fact, the emptier we are, the more nourishing and filling it will be. The critics' accusation ("This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them") becomes the Gospel's proclamation. This Good News of Christ received by faith (Gospel

+ faith) forms the link that “bridges” the great gap and links us back to God and neighbor. The bridge over the great gulf is “fixed,” in the sense of repaired, rebuilt, reconstructed. Permanently. Eternally. Since it is all done in Christ, and Christ begins in Greek with the letter chi (X), and he did it via his death on the cross and by his resurrection, we could say the great gulf is fi-X-ed. Where “fi” stands for fides (faith). And “X” stands for Christ and his cross. And “ed” stands for the “educated” person who is “led out” by the Gospel to walk in a new way. The cost of this education is borne by Christ and by his parent, God the Father. And it includes the hosting of a meal: the Messianic Banquet prefigured by the sacrament of Holy Communion.

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) :** *Painfully Aware*  
This Gospel fix is no blissful illusion. Rather it makes us all the more “painfully aware” of the great gulf between the rich and poor and our complicity in it through our economic systems even after faith in the Gospel is proclaimed. Most worshippers in U.S. churches probably cannot hear this parable without a ton of guilt over how rich we are, how much we consume, how wasteful we are with our scraps, how little we give to charity (less than 2% is the Lutheran average), and how we build walls and gates to insulate ourselves from the wounds and needs of others outside our doors. However, this painful awareness is good. For it brings us one step closer to the compassion Christ has for all of us. It is a pain that does not torment us in the fires of hell; rather, we endure and bear it as part of the cross of concern we carry. It is a pain that jolts us to our senses on this side of our death and calls us to repent while there is time and changes our ways and makes us ask, “What services for the disadvantaged are lacking in our community? What needs are we blind and insensitive to? And how do we rally the resources of Christian people to address them? How are we the church in

mission? Who are the poor outside our gate? What are their names?" It may be very painful to ask and answer these pressing questions, but it is a cruciformed pain that mobilizes, not paralyzes. In short, it involves a death and resurrection. A dying to the old and a rising to the new. This is much healthier and wholesome than being blissfully oblivious to the woeful, despicable divisions that afflict our world today.

### **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : Hospitable and Full Communion**

The calling of Christian disciples is to welcome all, imitating Jesus (who ate with the rich and poor) and Abraham (who hospitably entertained angels unaware). Part of it is a welcome to services of worship where the Gospel is proclaimed and a response of faith invited. That is, to warmly urge and assist others to come through the wall of separation via "The Gate" (Christ), to immerse themselves head-to-toe in Word, Font, and Meal, and to feast on the whole sacramental spread and not just a few small scraps tossed out into the trash. The ultimate goal is communion, full communion. Another part is a hospitable response to the social needs of those around us. In the community I serve, churches have banded together to ensure that a free hot meal is served every day of the year—Christmas and Easter included. This is not done out of "charity" or "pity for the poor." This is done out of hospitality. There are no income qualifications or income disqualifications. No question is asked if one is rich or poor. And no judgments are made. Some people may be hungry for food, others hungry for company. The goal is not just to dish out a meal, but to mix and mingle and engage in conversation and companionship (full communion). Thus, they are called "community meals" and not a hand-out. Nor, do we presume that we are "bringing Christ to others," for chances are pretty good that Christ is in that other person who comes to us. In the kingdom of God, it is not economics that determines with whom we

hang. It is Christ and his Spirit. Yes, the Gospel word is true: "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." Thank God for that! Bon Appetit! Or, as they say even better in Luther's native language (because it is more communal): froeliche Gemutlichkeit!