

A Great Chasm

Luke 16:19-31

16:19 "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day.

16:20 And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores,

16:21 who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores.

16:22 The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried.

16:23 In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side.

16:24 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.'

16:25 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.'

16:26 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.'

16:27 He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house--

16:28 for I have five brothers--that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.'

16:29 Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.'

16:30 He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.'

16:31 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.'"

Have you ever heard anyone say "you should keep religion out of politics"? Have you ever heard a Christian make that statement?

The next time you hear a Christian say that pick up a Bible and bomp them with the Bible about forty times on the head and hopefully they will come to their senses. It's one thing to say politicians shouldn't impose their religious beliefs upon others, it's one thing to say religion shouldn't be forced down someone's throat, but if you subscribe to a particular belief system, how on earth, how in the name of Jesus are you supposed to divorce yourself from your belief system when the time comes to vote on a particular issue or vote for a particular candidate?

Religious belief is not really something you can pick and choose whenever it is convenient. Christianity is not something you can turn on and turn off like a spigot or turn on and off like a CD player. Christianity is not just about heaven; it's also about life on earth. So Christianity cannot be compartmentalized, separated off from certain parts of our lives. No, Christianity has to do with everything and everybody on this God created planet.

And so our politics must be the politics of God, the politics of Jesus.

Please permit me to get "my cards on the table".

My father is a big Republican. Big Republican. In fact, he may be the biggest Republican this side of Texas. Go on and elect him into the Republican Hall of Fame: Abraham Lincoln, Dwight Eisenhower, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, Emmit Ayers. Go into my father's home and you'll see your share of elephant statues.

I remember as a small child wanting to please my father, wanting to get my father's approval, and so I would make political speeches making fun of L.B. J. and Lady Bird-----Lady Bird Johnson.

I recall as a freshman at UNC going to the campus meeting of Young Republicans and I remember calling my dad and letting him know I went to Young Republicans. Aren't you proud of me, Dad!

A few years later after getting an education at UNC and having a few years of seminary under my belt I remember worrying about "coming out of the closet", worrying about telling my father about my new liberal/read Christian political orientation. I did have good reason to worry. The years ahead relating to my father were not easy.

It's interesting, isn't it?, that I turned out to be a liberal independent who votes mostly for liberal Democrats while my father is a conservative Fox News Republican. How does your politics compare to that of your close relatives?

I'm sure---I'm sure part of my political formation at first----at first was my way of differentiating from my father. I'll grant you that. We've all got to be different from our parents one way or another, right? We need to be our own persons and sometimes we differentiate with politics. I'm aware of family dynamics and how they can play out. But---but my political leanings no longer feel like the result of trying to be different from my earthly dad. Rather, my politics, as your politics should be, are an attempt to please another father, our Heavenly Father. Or put another way, our politics should be part of our effort to put flesh on our religious beliefs.

These days I don't care about whether I vote for a Republican or a Democrat. I no longer have any vested interest in either political party. What I do feel compelled to do is to vote for the candidates who I believe God would most approve of their political positions.

Now that last statement is a tricky one, isn't it? It's tricky, it's complicated, it's problematic because the fundamentalist Christian believes he or she is doing exactly the same thing. God, they believe, is against gays and God is against abortion and God is a violent God who conquers evil and so they conclude Republicans are the ones to vote for.

I, on the other hand, don't think God approves of what some Republicans do playing the race card, don't think God approves of Republicans playing the gay card, don't think God approves tough military talk and action, don't believe God approves of going to war quickly, hastily, hurriedly. And so out of my faith I tend to vote for Democrats. But hear me, I have no vested interest in voting Democrat. Show me a politician who cares about the healthcare of all people, show me a politician who cares about gays and lesbians and women having equal rights, show me a politician who cares about the environment, who cares about being a good neighbor to the rest of God's world, who is interested in protecting religious freedom even freedom from religion, show me that candidate and if he or she is a Republican I'll vote for that person.

And even though I don't think Christians should cast their votes based on one issue, show me a Republican who cares about the least of these, the poorest of the poor and I will gladly, happily, readily vote for him or her.

There is a lot of room for honest to God differences in politics among Christians because---- because life is complex, the Bible is complex, and Church history is the history of diverse Christians who believed a multitude of things. Liberal Christians don't have all the truth and conservative Christians don't have all the truth. Life is not always so clear cut and we can get the truth they don't get and they can get the truth we don't get. That's not to say all views are equal or to deny that some views are just plain wrong, plain unChristlike. But----but it is to acknowledge that when it comes to faith leading to politics and legislation what lever to pull on the voting machine can sometimes be a toss up. It can be muddy. But----and here's the point and here's the sermon. When I go into a voting booth I am aware that the Bible is clear about our responsibility to the poor. And the Bible is full of----chalk full of condemnations of the rich. If you miss that in the Bible you are as blind as Hellen Keller. If you miss that in the Bible let me suggest Lasik eye surgery. You can't miss it because it's all over the Bible. You can't miss it even if you try to miss it. And so when I pull the lever in the voting booth I imagine how my vote is going to impact the poor, yes, even how my vote is going to impact people in this congregation struggling week to week to make ends meet.

When I go into a voting booth I have on my mind a parable Jesus told that is recorded in Luke 16. The parable begins with these words.-----There was a rich man. He feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate---and at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, Lazarus covered with sores, Lazarus with no health insurance, Lazarus as low as a person can get, Lazarus who ate the crumbs from the rich man's table. Are you starting to get the picture?

Well, the poor man dies and surprise, surprise, and it really was a surprise if you go by some of the Old Testament theology found in Deuteronomy, he ends up in heaven. And the rich man dies and surprise, surprise, he ends up in Hades. Who would have ever thought it. And the rich man 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.'" In the afterlife, according to the parable Jesus told, there was a great chasm between Lazarus and the rich man. Don't miss the point. In the afterlife there was a great chasm between Lazarus and the rich man just as there had been a great chasm on earth between the rich man and poor Lazarus who lay at his gate. The poor man had been right there, right there at his gate, and yet----there was a great chasm between them. No contact. No relationship. No caring. No generosity. No justice. And that was the problem.

A great chasm. When I cast my ballot I vote hoping that Lazarus will not have to eat crumbs anymore. When I debate about who to vote for I see the sores on Lazarus' body. When I go into the voting booth I vote hoping that the great chasm will be no more. And yet, I fear the chasm during the last 20 years has not shrunk but has gotten wider. Permit me to explain.

Lazarus during the past twenty years has been getting a nice mortgage deduction, but not the poor man. The interest deduction on mortgages was started with the purpose of encouraging home ownership. Wonderful idea! But look at what has happened. Today if you make \$30,000 to \$40,000 you may be able to deduct \$50 from your income tax. Wow, a whopping \$50. But get this, if you make \$200,000 you can deduct \$29,000 in federal income tax. Twenty-nine thousand dollars. That would feed some mouths, wouldn't it? That would pay some doctor's bills, wouldn't it? \$29,000 if you are in a higher tax bracket. \$50 if you are in a lower bracket. Is that fair? Is that equitable? Is that reasonable? Is that the America we want? Is that what God wants?

Interest deductions on mortgages so everyone could own a home started out as a noble tax goal but look at what has happened. The current policy encourages without limit deferral of income allowing----allowing the Americans with the most money to build larger houses. Do we really want a government that is financing bigger homes for the rich when there are so many needs in our country, when so many Americans can barely even pay rent?

And let's not forget about automobiles. We would be remiss as we look at Luke 16 if we didn't talk about our tax code and automobiles, if we didn't allude to the car Lazarus is driving. Have you seen those ads in newspapers enticing the rich to cash in on the business tax break they will get if they buy an automobile that gets 8 miles to the gallon? Have you seen all those Hummers on American roads and have you thought about how many of them have been subsidized by you and me?

It gets worse. The next time you get a pay check take a close look at it. Workers making under \$83,000 pay 6.3% of their income in social security tax. But guess what. Once an executive's income exceeds \$83,000 the executive does not pay any social security tax on the income over

that amount. Not one more penny. Now tell me who needs the most help, the person making over \$83,000 or the person paying 6.3% of their \$20,000 salary.

Write this down. The average worker can defer their compensation when they pay income tax by putting money in their 401K. However, if a family has any money to save they are capped at \$1,000 a month. But get this, an executive of a company can defer an unlimited amount----an unlimited amount can be deferred in compensation plans allowing the executive not to pay taxes until much later in life.

Speaking of executives let's look at Lazarus' compensation. Since 1970 executive compensation has risen by 600%-----600% while work is outsourced to India. Our tax code rewards companies that pay executives with lucrative stock options, but we penalize companies for retaining pension benefits for the average worker.

I'm not finished with executive compensation. According to a Fortune 500 survey of a hundred of the nation's biggest companies, during 2003 the typical CEO got a raise of 14 percent, bringing total take-home pay to more than \$13 million while----while the paychecks of salaried employees grew an anemic 3.5 percent, and---and a lot of them got pink slips.

Robert Reich, in his book, *Reason: Why Liberals Will win the Battle for America*, asks, "Where is the shame? In 2002, Motorola contributed \$38 million to a special pension trust fund with assets of \$135 million for its top executives. Meanwhile, the company's pension plan for more than 70,000 employees and retirees was underfunded---that's right, underfunded by \$1.4 billion.

Reich asks, "Where's the outrage? No sooner do top executive receive their pay than they shelter it from taxes. In 2000, for example, William Esrey, then the chief executive of Sprint earned \$20 million in stock options. He promptly bought a tax shelter from Ernst and Young, the accounting firm, that enabled him to delay reporting the profits for tax purposes until 2030.

Where is the fury? In the coming decade tax cuts will transfer more wealth to the richest one percent of the population than any fiscal policies in history.

Where are the Christians? Since welfare ended, most of the women who had been on welfare have shifted from being poor and on welfare to being poor and working. One major study that traced former welfare mothers into the job market found that most were working for around \$12,000 a year. The major difference now is they have the added expense and stress of trying to find someone else to care for their young kids. You can thank President Clinton for that one.

Tell me, I'm going to make you tell me, where are the Christians concerned the poor man eating the crumbs from Lazarus' table. Where are the Christians who give a flip about the Lazarus who is lying at our gate? And please don't tell me you help with Room In the Inn. Thank you for doing that, but that's not enough.

I don't like Luke 16 any more than you do. Frequently, typically, generally speaking I find that coordinating my politics with my faith leads me to take positions which are not in my own best self interest. It's like Walter Bruggemann, an Old Testament professor, says "When you put

money into the offering plate you are financing a revolution against yourself.” Put into political language, often it means that when a Christian casts a vote he or she ends up voting against their self. It’s enough to make a Christian not want to vote, isn’t it? It’s enough to make a Christian want to stay home from the polls. But we can’t. We can’t stay home because there is a chasm. We can’t stay home on election day because Lazarus is lying at the gate starving to death while the rich man is living a life of luxury.

Perhaps Luke 16 is a word of God for us today.

I don’t care about Democrat. I don’t care about Republican. As a person of God, though, I have to care about the poor.

A great chasm. May it be no more. Amen.