

September 25, 2022 – The Great Chasm (26th Sunday in Ordinary Time)
Gospel of Luke 16:19-31
Fr. John

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus contains the statement of Abraham that there is a great chasm that makes it impossible to cross over between the two. It makes one ask: What is the nature of such a divide and where do we experience the reality of that in our world?

We often hear the lament that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Indeed we have oligarchs who are not just millionaires but billionaires and on the other hand, millions who are homeless and starving.

While these two situations are extreme and most of us cannot identify with either of them, there are some important lessons to be learned here.

First of all, the story doesn't say that the rich man was a bad person - only that he was wealthy. So Jesus wasn't condemning wealth in itself. He himself was the beneficiary of the generosity of others [eg. Joseph of Arimathea]. And we are aware of some very wealthy people who have used their fortunes in benevolent and philanthropic endeavours. Some of these have even done so without any fanfare or publicity.

No - the real reason why the rich man wound up in Hades, was that he paid no attention to someone at his very gate who was starving. Even the part about the dogs licking Lazarus' sores is a reminder that the poor are sometimes more generous in sharing the little they have with others in need.

Perhaps this brings us to the point that we may miss in the story - the point about the great divide between the rich and the poor. The poor have their culture and their community and the rich have theirs. All of us between those groups have ours as well. We are generally comfortable mingling with like-minded people who we view as being within our particular social and economic circle. And seldom do these circles intersect. Folks generally gravitate to others who come from the same background and similar experiences of life.

I recall when I was pastor at Holy Cross parish, a number of us volunteered to help with what was called the 'Breakfast Club' on Saturday mornings down at the hall at St. Paul Anglican Cathedral in downtown Regina. It was an outreach to many of the street people and we were not only encouraged to prepare and serve the meal but, as time permitted, to sit down, eat and converse with them. I have to confess that most of us found this part of it very challenging as most of us volunteers were from white, middle class backgrounds and had little idea of how even to converse with folks who were living a far different experience of life. The chasm was indeed a daunting one.

Biblically, there were three categories of the poor: widows, orphans, and strangers.

Widows in those times were left virtually destitute without husbands or sons to provide for them. These days, while we do have a basic social net to provide for the elderly, our experience with the Covid pandemic these last two and half years has unveiled how much is lacking in our care of the elderly.

When we think of orphans, we shouldn't just think of children whose parents have died or abandoned them but also anyone who has suffered being an outcast because of their racial origin, sexual orientation, or cultural background. [We are reminded that next Friday, September 30 is the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation and a day in which we ponder what we have done or not done in view of what that day means].

As far as the poor also includes strangers, we are being challenged to welcome those who have had to flee their home country because of war, social, or economic oppression. [Today happens to be the World Day of Migrants and Refugees]. We are reminded that with the exception of the Indigenous people of this country, all of us are here because we or our ancestors were immigrants or refugees. We were, [as Newfoundlanders would say,] 'from away'.

So the chasm in Jesus' parable represents these and many more issues that divide the human community.

Jesus was clear that God's judgment will not depend so much on how we observed religious practices and kept the rules of the Church, but rather how we regarded and interacted with the Lazaruses at our gate.