

The Kingdom and the Chasm

We ended last week, at the benediction, with a reminder that God's judgment is always restorative. It is important to say that because churches need to be on guard, always, against the incursion of judgmentalism. In these parables of Jesus that we are considering in this season, Jesus is clear that there is no room for judgmentalism in the kingdom, among his other points.

I remember a conversation I once had with a colleague. My friend had drifted away from church, and she said she never really felt drawn back to church until the moment she realized her darling infant has become a screaming toddler. She said, "I could see a time coming when I might love my child but not like my child much, and it seemed like a good time to find some religion." She started attending a little church down the street from her home and joined. A few years later I was catching up with her again and asked her how her church was. She looked me dead in the eye and said, "I don't think I'll mess with that anymore. I'm trying to teach my children how to be kind and decent to people and every time I turned around, there was another sermon about who wasn't suitable in God's house. I think my children can just do without that."

The church is supposed to be about grace. It is jarring when we encounter anything else.

Yet, the 15th chapter of Luke - flush with the parables of grace about the finding of the lost sheep and coin, and finally, the return of the prodigal son - *that* chapter gives way to virtual theological whiplash as the reader slams headlong into the stony slab of the 16th chapter: Full of admonitions about the love of money and rich men suffering in Hades.

At a glance, this parable seems empty of grace; instead oozing judgment. And maybe it is. But, if the gospel is about grace, then we need to struggle with this text until we find good news.

We *may* be perfectly comfortable with this text. I, for one, don't think of myself as a rich man. I have absolutely no complaints, but this preacher just doesn't count himself as being among the rich. And perhaps when the super-rich use money to buy influence, and corporate misbehavior makes the markets tumble and roll like a hurricane, it's easy to conclude, "This is right. This is *justice*. The rich are getting pummeled for a change."

There's just one problem with this line of thinking. It doesn't really matter whether or not I count myself among the rich, according to the measures of the world, I am. And so are you.

There is a website called "The global rich list" and it takes a measurement of one's relative wealth against the rest of the world. You can go by income or savings. I chose income. It is highly simplistic, to be sure, but if *subsistence* can be measured by what takes to get by, surely *wealth* can be measured by what one has in excess of what it takes the least wealthy to get by. I was challenged by a minister friend of mine to see where I stood, so I anted up and entered a

figure roughly my annual salary into the little conversion calculator. I was astonished – astonished - to learn that I am approximately the 4.2 millionth richest person in the world! Sure, by their metric, approximately 4.2 million people in the world have more than I do, many far more. But over six billion have less, many far less. Now, I'm neither richer nor poorer than this congregation. Pastor's salaries are roughly supposed to line up with their educational and professional peers in the congregations they serve. No matter where we fall in the economic spectrum today, no matter what pressures we feel, *compared with huge swaths of the globe, we have it pretty good.* So, whatever this parable says to the rich, it says to us.

There's no comfort for us in seeing the rich get their due. So, maybe we want to think a little more about this parable?

Now, nowhere do I find in the pages of scripture a condemnation of the rich simply for being rich. Shockingly, as much as Jesus had to say about money, and he had a lot to say about money, it was generally about what we do with it, not about the condition of having it. Money in the gospel is pretty value neutral. It is what is done with it about which Jesus concerns himself.

Now what I think is pretty clearly not happening in this story, based on its context, is the blanket, eternal condemnation of folks based on economics. A facile glance at the parable might offer that assessment, but that would be wrong. First, paying attention to the context, it is clear that this chapter is sandwiched between stories of inclusion, mercy, kindness and forgiveness. In the stories of grace in chapter 15, no one, not even the rich, gets left out. Second, there's a clue embedded in the text that, for years, I missed.

There was an ancient practice of storytelling employed by rabbis in Jesus's time. They would periodically tell what were called, "Eleazar of Damascus" stories. They weren't necessarily biblical, but they made their point. "Who," you may ask, "Is Eleazar of Damascus?" He is Abraham's heir in Genesis, before the covenant is fulfilled yielding offspring. He is a biblical character hardly worth noting. But when the rabbis would tell the Eleazar stories, they were stories about Eleazar being sent to earth on an errand to point to the kingdom of God. The stories always featured Eleazar coming, incognito, disguised as a shepherd or a beggar, to point to the kingdom of God. So, these rabbis would tell the stories of the kingdom of God being right in front someone, right there, so close it could be tasted, with Eleazar pointing the way, and do you know how Eleazar translates from Hebrew to Greek? It's Lazarus.¹

Lazarus has something to say to us.

Hopefully we are not ourselves judgmental. Generally, I know we try to be good people, and by and large, I think we are. So, the idea of a parable offering us judgment rather than grace is more than a little disconcerting, particularly when the language of the parable is strong language. But, again, the function of judgment in the Bible is to make something right. It's restorative.

¹ Thomas G. Long, *A Great Chasm*, preached at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, NC.

That's how we can understand that God's judgment is always full of grace. And if we pay attention to the text, if we look at the stories right before and after this parable, what we see are stories full of grace. But right here in the middle we have this reminder... and it is a reminder of being watchful for the kingdom of God. And where is the kingdom of God? It is where generosity, kindness and mercy abound.

You see, what I think Luke wants us to avoid is cheap grace. Cheap grace is grace that has been misunderstood. When God gives us grace you see, it is to transform us from a *broken* state where we don't live as though we were created in God's image, made for community, fellowship and love, to a *redeemed* state where, where even when we miss the mark, we are still striving for the kingdom to which Lazarus is pointing, the kingdom marked by generosity, kindness and mercy. *Cheap grace is grace that has missed the point and lost the opportunity for transformation.*

The rich man, suffering in torment, cries out to father Abraham, "Have mercy on me and send Lazarus down here to cool my throat."

It's as if he has learned nothing.

"Child," says Abraham, "There is a great chasm between us."

"Well, then, send him to warn my brothers that they may avoid this torment."

I have struggled to determine just what that chasm is that cannot be bridged. I may be way out on a limb; I could be missing the mark, but I think perhaps the chasm that cannot be bridged is that of cheap grace. The rich man's concern remains himself. Failing to secure relief for himself, he tries to turn Lazarus into an errand boy to enable his brothers to avoid torment themselves. *Nothing has changed.*

Grace as a failsafe against perceived future torment is cheap because it misses the point. That's not grace; it's cosmic hell insurance. It misses the point.

There is a chasm of cheap grace fixed between just covering one's own eternity and looking for the kingdom of God.

"Child," says Abraham, "There is a chasm between us." That is not the language of judgmentalism, that is the language of lament. It is the lament that all around, God is offering grace and when it is turned into something other than what it is meant to be, there may as well be a canyon yawning between where we are and the kingdom of God.

In grace, God is offering us judgment, a chance to see one of those glimpses of the kingdom, as a situation is made right, fixed, redeemed. But with cheap grace, all we may see is *judgmentalism*.

You can't bridge the gap between cheap grace and the mercy of God. They are too different. They are too far apart.

There is a lot of cheap grace around. There always has been. I know at times I have been harsh on hellfire and damnation preaching, and I don't want to critique the sincerity of the preachers or the worshippers, but if the primary and only concern is saving one's skin out of fear of future torment, I'm not sure that grace has really happened.

My question for us is whether our life together and our lives apart are marked by grace?

You see, the point of this parable is not that if you've been materially wealthy in this life you're going to suffer in the next. That's not good news. That's not Luke's point because it would be inconsistent with the message of the Gospel that grace transforms us. But maybe this parable is poised there for the Pharisees who are full of the love of money...it sounds dirtier in the original Greek: *phylargoria*. These Pharisees were stunted in their spiritual growth with the love of money. And here's this story saying, "Look, look, there's the kingdom of God... come on in! Don't miss it."

These Pharisees are quoting scripture to justify themselves... they were looking back to the Hebrew Scriptures and there finding a Deuteronomic proof-text to justify the idea that if they're wealthy, it means God is blessing them, and if someone is poor, well then, God must be punishing them and it is best not to interfere with the work of God. So, pardon me, while I step over you famished beggar and go on to my abundance, because my prosperity is clearly God's doing. And let's not be too judgy, because the prosperity Gospel comes around in every age - anytime we think God is blessing us more than others so that we can just sit around and feel blessed.

There's a great chasm.

The grace of God is all around us, but it's so easy to get caught up in something else... I've done it; you've done it. A kingdom opportunity was right there... right there and we were too busy with something else.

The kingdom is all around us, and sometimes... sometimes we see it.

Many years ago, I led a mission trip with the youth group of the church I served at the time alongside my brother and one of our dearest friends. We were in a city, and we had taken the youth for ice cream. That's a staple of youth ministry; it's a bribe the leaders give to the youth for working hard and being good. Being in a city, naturally we were near areas where significant poverty was evident, but it was also where the businesspeople would come for lunch during the day. As it happened, the closest ice-cream shop was next to a Chinese restaurant. There were a great number of impoverished people outside the restaurant, probably without homes. Now in this urban immersion mission experience, we were all repeatedly admonished not to give out cash. Buy a meal if you wish, donate to the agencies who are equipped to help, but we were told, DO NOT GIVE OUT CASH! Of course, a man asked us for food right in front of the kids. Realizing that the hypocrisy of brushing past folks experiencing homelessness on a mission trip to get to the ice-cream parlor would send the wrong message to our youth, we decided it was time to teach an object lesson. The adults huddled, and we decided that I would take the youth

in for ice cream, and they would go into the Chinese restaurant and buy his dinner and carry it to him since he wasn't allowed in. When about twenty minutes passed, I began to become concerned. After another twenty minutes, when the shop was closing, the other advisors appeared. Having spent 45 minutes herding the band of cats known as adolescent youth by myself, I wanted an explanation. Sheepishly, the two advisors said, "Well, we went in to buy him dinner and we came out with his meal. But, then, there was someone else waiting asking us to help and you all were only forty feet away one of the kids was watching. So, we did it again. And then we had to do it again. Somebody was always watching! It only ended because the restaurant closed. Our object lesson set us both back a hundred bucks."

And you know, we laughed about it all the way back to the church.

It was only later, much later; that I realized that it was the kingdom of God.

Don't miss it. Don't miss it.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.