

Sermon For September 25, 2016 - "No More Separations"

Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

[click here for today's scriptures](#)

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Today we hear another of Jesus' parables, those stories he told to shock us and get our attention. In this parable, Jesus tells about a rich man who completely ignored a poor man named Lazarus who lay at his gate. The rich man must have noticed that Lazarus had nothing to eat and that he was covered in sores. He had to have seen the dogs licking his wounds! But he did nothing. He just passed Lazarus by again and again. The rich man's inability to see a fellow human being caused a great chasm to come between him and Lazarus and between him and God. The rich man lived his life separated from his neighbor and separated from God who commands us to love our neighbor and care for those in need.

What happens to you when there is someone who is very visibly poor right in front of you? Do you pass by?

Do you stop and help? Do you feel paralyzed by questions about what is the right thing to do and how to best respond? Most of us here don't pass people in great need on a regular basis. Especially in Decorah, we rarely encounter people who are visibly poor. We rarely see people who are homeless, people begging on the streets. Part of that is because, while rural poverty in the US is so real, it is often more hidden and ignored.

But it is also because there is a great chasm between those of us who are comparatively rich, by global standards, and those who are poor in our world. Our lives are vastly different from those who have to walk miles each morning simply to get clean water or from those who live on less than a dollar a day. Sometimes we even talk as if we are living in different worlds - "first world countries and third world countries", "the developed world and the developing world." That is problematic language because we share one earth, yet that language highlights the very real chasm between us. It can feel like we live in a different world than two-thirds of the earth's population. Even here in the US, as income inequality grows, we live in vastly different realities than many of our fellow Americans. Since we tend to isolate ourselves with people who are like us, we often remain separated from those in great need. All of this leads to a great chasm between us and a large number of God's people.

A similar great chasm has grown up between white people and people of color in the US. African-Americans, especially, face major long standing, generational obstacles to equality. Unjust laws, housing codes, and revenue policies, to name just a few issues, have left so many black people lying in our streets covered with the sores and wounds of racism. We who are white often can't even hear their desperate cries because we live so separated from communities of color.

These chasms lead to torment for all of us- not just those who are poor and visibly in need. God intends for us to live in harmony together loving God and loving our neighbor. When we don't, we all suffer. Those who are poor are most negatively impacted by the divisions in our world, but these separations impact us all. We get trapped in deep pits, cut off from life-giving relationships with one another and with God. We see the great chasms between us but feel paralyzed about how to address them - about what to do and how to live in the face of such disparities in our world. We want to help that homeless person on the street but don't

know what will be helpful. We want to support the refugees fleeing Syria but there are so many obstacles between us and them. We want to address racism and yet the task feels overwhelming.

Our parable today gives us a vivid picture of how great the chasms between us and God and between us and our neighbors can become. It offers a stark image of the reality of our sin and brokenness. As the parable ends, things look pretty hopeless for the rich man and his brothers. They've ignored God's law and the prophet; they won't be convinced even if someone rises from the dead. Yet this one parable does not give us the whole story. There is a bigger reality at work in our world.

God doesn't just long for us to have life-giving relationships with God and one another and leave us to our own devices. As we heard two weeks ago with the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin in chapter 15 of Luke, God goes to great lengths to find us and help us. God, in Jesus, has entered into our sin and brokenness, into death, even into hell to search for us. And God searches for us, not to tell us what to do or to try to convince us to act differently, but to set us free from the sin that binds us, to raise us up from pits of despair and into new life. God searches for us and finds us through the Word, worship, and sacraments, through others, through creation. God finds us and convicts us of the sin that keeps us separated from one another. Then God forgives us and sets us free from paralysis to do what we can. We discover we can't overcome all the divisions in our world but we can make a difference right where we live. We can't fix all the problems but we can show love because we are loved and forgiven.

God has fully entered into the chasms that separate us from God and now, as the book of Romans tells us, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. And that love of God is a love for each person throughout the world. So as we are drawn into the love of God, we are made part of a love that encompasses all humanity, all of creation. We are loved, we are forgiven and we are set free to be in relationship with God's people. We are set free to see others, to love them, to do what we can to help, and to trust that God is at work in and beyond us. We have what we need.

Let's take a few moments to pray and rest in this love that then sends us out to serve.

Amen. Thanks be to God.