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9/25/22, Luke 16:19-31

“Boundary Crossing”

Recently, I had an experience that helped me to identify with the rich man in our parable today. I don’t fly very often. When I do travel, I fly coach. One thing I always take note of is that curtain that separates coach from first class. When the flight attendant pulls it shut, the message comes through loud and clear. That area is off-limits. What goes on up there is none of my business.

If you heard my sermon a couple weeks ago, you know I went to Europe this summer. I promise I won’t spend the rest of the fall sharing stories about my summer vacation, but I want to share something that happened to me on the return flight.

I had a layover in Munich Germany. The flight was already delayed an hour. I just wanted to get home without any troubles. As I went to board, I placed my ticket on the little machine so it could read my barcode. When I did, it spit out a little slip of paper. As soon as I read the words on the top of this piece of paper my heart sunk: “Seat Change.”

The first thing I thought was, “They’re moving me to a middle seat.” I immediately started preparing myself for a seven-hour flight squished between two people. I also started to get perturbed, because I paid extra to select a window seat.

However, I continued to read the little slip of paper. It informed me that my new seat was in Business Class, row 1 seat B. I got bumped up to one of the best seats on the plane. Some of you may be familiar with first class, but for those of you, like me, who never experienced it, let me tell you about life on the other side of the curtain.

No more than a minute after I found my seat, the flight attendant came by and asked if I wanted something to drink. I looked around to see what other people were drinking. There were glasses of champagne everywhere. I thought, “This is going to be all right.”

A short time later, the flight attendant came by with a menu and said, “I just wanted you to be thinking about what you will want to order for dinner.” The kicker came when the guy next to me reclined his chair and it went all the way back until he was completely horizontal. I began looking for my seat controls. I also began to wonder if I could even go back to flying coach. And I gained a whole new appreciation for that curtain. It was just enough of a barrier to provide a spacious and peaceful environment.

I was thinking about this in terms of our parable today. Jesus describes a rich man and a poor man and the barriers between them. The rich man wears fancy clothes, eats sumptuously every day, and enjoys the good things that money can buy. The poor man, Lazarus, is homeless. He is starving, he longs for just the crumbs that fall from the rich man’s table. He has sores on his body. The two men are separated by a wall. We know this, because Lazarus is sitting at the rich man’s gate. In the parable, the two live in close proximity, but they never encounter one another on account of this barrier. They never meet.

Then, there is a reversal of fortune. Lazarus dies, goes to heaven, and is received by Abraham. The rich man dies and is buried. He ends up in hell and in eternal agony. This, by the way, is an explanation for why God allows suffering. If God is all good and all-powerful, why do

bad things happen to good people? Why does life seem so unfair? Why doesn't God end hunger or bring peace to the Middle East? Why does God allow innocent children to suffer?

One answer to that question is reversal. It's found repeatedly in the Gospels. Jesus said, "The first will be last and the last will be first." It's only fair. The Beatitudes of Jesus reflected this reversal. "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:4-5).

How do you explain bad things happening to good people and good things happening to bad people? There will be a reversal. I'm not saying it's the only answer. I'm not saying it's the best answer, but it is an answer that is found repeatedly in the Gospels and it's what happens in our parable today.

Lazarus experiences hell on earth. His life is a living hell. The rich man experiences all the best things of life: the finest clothing, and sumptuous food. When Lazarus dies, he goes to heaven, and is comforted. When the rich man dies, that's when he experiences hell. Now he's the one who longs for just a drop of water to ease his suffering.

Here's the thing. Neither one of them needed to experience hell. The rich man could have spared Lazarus his suffering, his hell on earth. In turn, Lazarus could have blessed the rich man. Rev. James Forbes, the former senior minister at the Riverside Church in New York City, used to put it this way. He'd say, "No one gets into heaven without a recommendation from the poor."

These two Characters were one another's salvation. The rich man didn't go to hell because he was rich. It wasn't because he was a bad guy. He might've been a wonderful human being. He may have been a person that always came through with a contribution whenever there was a crisis at the synagogue. He may have been kind and thoughtful in all kinds of ways.

He didn't go to hell because he was rich. His failure was in never crossing the barrier between himself and Lazarus. There was a gate and he never used it. Lazarus could have been his recommendation. All the rich man had to do was pass through the gate to offer food and comfort. That way, Lazarus would've avoided hell on earth and the rich man would have avoided hell in the afterlife. God doesn't want anyone to experience hell.

In life, it was a wall that separated the rich man and Lazarus. In death, that wall became a chasm that no one can cross. The good news for us is that there is time to cross barriers. We can find ways to get around a wall. We can break down walls. We can climb walls. Walls have gates. But if we wait too long, we lose our opportunity. At some point, the wall becomes a chasm that no one can cross.

Could it be that the message of this parable is to find ways to cross the boundaries and barriers that separate us from the other? Where are the gates that allow us to connect and relieve suffering? When there is a gate allowing a means to be in solidarity with someone in need, we use it.

Last week, following the death of the Queen, soccer superstar David Beckham did something surprising to many. Speaking with CNN, Beckham revealed that he had spent over 12 hours waiting in line to view the casket. Apparently, someone saw him and offered to bring him through a side door so he could cut the line.

He decided not to take advantage of his celebrity, but to wait along with everybody else. He explained, "We all want to be here together, we all want to experience something where we celebrate the amazing life of our queen." He could have gone to the front of the line. He could

have maintained separation between himself and the crowd. That moment was a gate, and he chose solidarity with those who mourned. I think that's a great image for this time when our nation is so polarized. There are walls that separate us socially, politically, and economically, but those barriers can be crossed.

Recently, I heard about a church that set up a food pantry. It's one of these boxes that sits on their front lawn. People can come and get nonperishable foods at any time. However, they are promoting it as something that anyone can use. It's not just for those who are struggling.

If a neighbor across the street is preparing dinner and realizes they need a can of kidney beans, they can go to the food pantry. I like it, because it's a way of being in solidarity with those in need. At that food pantry, nobody knows who's needy and who isn't.

God doesn't want anyone to experience hell, not on earth, not any time. That's why Jesus crossed every boundary there was. Our ministry is one of being in solidarity with the other. We can be the salvation for someone experiencing hell on earth and they can be ours. If I can put it this way, when we give someone an upgrade in this life, we all get an upgrade. Everyone is blessed!