

Glen Ridge Congregational Church, September 26, 2010
 Eighteenth Sunday of Pentecost – Proper 21-C
 Luke 16:19-31

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

On Friday afternoon I wanted to be sure I was home to watch the Oprah show at 4:00 – to see the big announcement concerning that \$100,000,000 challenge grant to the Newark School system – maybe you saw it, you probably at the least heard about it or read about it. Sitting on Oprah’s stage were Governor Christie, Mayor Cory Booker, and Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg – the whole thing was fascinating to me – of course, seeing this mid-twenty year old who is already worth, according to news reports, seven billion dollars – that’s amazing to me –there he sat, along with the governor and the mayor – and I listened to their dreams for making Newark a model school system for the entire country. It’s an extraordinary goal. And I kept thinking about our SCEEP children who will hopefully benefit from all this – this story has a face for us here, doesn’t it. Now, of course there will be much discussion about whether this windfall will help the Newark school system or not – the motivation for the timing of the grant – the politics that will most certainly be involved - lots of layers of conversation will happen during the coming weeks and months – lots of issues will be debated. But what struck me was the glimmer of hope for our SCEEP children and others like them.

I’ve struggled all this week with this passage from Luke and the challenge it puts in front of us – and coupled with the words from Timothy – well, it speaks to us loud and clear about the difficulty some people have with wealth – with money – with accumulating stuff. And if we don’t believe we have issues with accumulating stuff, just check out the Biddulph Room already as people are beginning to bring in their items, their stuff, for the fall Rummage Sale.

Timothy talks about contentment – contentment if we have food and clothing – and he cautions us not to put our hope in wealth – which is so uncertain – put our hope in God – hmmm...what does that say about pinning our hopes for improvement in the Newark schools on a \$100,000,000 challenge grant? One of the topics of debate over this, for sure.

These passages are difficult, aren’t they. But let’s let the spirit move among us and let’s think about what true riches are these days, about the great chasm that divides people from others. These readings really do have something to say to us – if we’ll let them in spite of our discomfort.

A minister by the name of Taylor Mills writes:

In today’s parable, the rich man crosses paths with poor Lazarus every day. He sees Lazarus waiting at the gate of the house – the dogs licking his sores. Lazarus sees the rich man go in and come out. And he waits for the servant to bring out the rich man’s breadcrumbs for him to eat. Indeed Lazarus longs for those crumbs, even though, as was the custom in some places where water was scarce and food abundant, the crumbs were used, instead of water, to clean one’s hands when the meal was done.

It’s clear that the rich man knew about Lazarus – he refers to Lazarus by name, even after both of them have died. But did you notice something else? The rich man

(interesting that he doesn't have a name) – the rich man never speaks directly to Lazarus – not even from hell where he is in torment. And furthermore, when he is in hell, he still expects Lazarus to serve him – he asks Father Abraham to send Lazarus to him, to dip his finger in water to cool his tongue. And he wants him to go to his brothers to warn them so they don't also experience this torment.

Even after death, the rich man keeps Lazarus at a distance – and now that he's in trouble, he expects Lazarus to cross that distance to help him. That's quite a chasm, isn't it.

Now, none of us has a poor person at the end of our driveway waiting for the dirty crumbs from our tables. What does this parable have to say to us? Let's ask ourselves, how am I like the rich man? Who is it I ignore – or treat as less than fully human. Who is our Lazarus – the one who I regard as less than I am?

We know there's a lot of need "out there" – we know we have only so much time, only so much money, only so much compassion.

The whole passage, given our context as a people who have so much more than 90% of the world's population – is so distressing – even for those who share their time, give their money, spend their compassion on the poor locally, indeed within the world community. It can get overwhelming to us.

Those of us gathered here for worship this morning do care about the poor in our community and in the world. We do give to special mission offerings – like Neighbors in Need – like One Great Hour of Sharing – we're generous in our help to hurricane victims, earthquake victims, flooding victims. We do make food offerings each week in the grocery cart, serve at the food pantry and soup kitchen.

We pray each week for people near and far who suffer. We work the rummage sales – not only to raise money for the ministry of the church but to offer inexpensive clothing to the community – and even free clothing to people who cannot pay. And on top of this, we also give money to this church – knowing that the money is used not only to run this place but to do many good works in God's name.

But this passage is so hard – perhaps because we know we have so much and don't know how much more we can afford to give or are expected to give – well, friends, it's not having money that's the problem – it is allowing that money and concern about money to dominate us to the point where we don't care about others outside our immediate sphere of interest.

It's not money that's the problem - it's love of money that's the problem. On some level we know that but.....

Maybe it's a good thing that we have trouble with this passage. Because maybe that means that we do care and care deeply – that we are on a lifelong journey of discipleship, trying to live as Jesus calls us to live. Maybe it's a good thing that we all struggle with this – it comes down to looking at how we live and how we care for one another. Sometimes we need to be jolted out of our comfort zones by passages such as this.

All week I've been trying to get in touch with what makes this passage so difficult for me – what is it that God is trying to teach me? Like others, I worry about money – I really don't like opening my 401K or IRA statements – I wish I could give more to all the needs that surround me. I worry about the financial future of this church – I confess it gets very personal for me at times. But that's not entirely what's had my stomach

churning this week. There really aren't a lot of things that I need or even want – I am truly grateful for the fact that I have food, clothing, shelter – I'm truly content with what I have in terms of material things – I have enough - and I really do have faith that God will lead me – if I'm open to it. God has never let me down and I trust that. My difficulty with this passage is not about money – it's about the lost opportunity for relationships.

I've come to realize that my discomfort comes with the chasm between people – broken relationships, how we care for one another, how our thought processes get in the way of working together, of being connected, of an atmosphere of distrust that keeps us apart.

It wasn't far into the Oprah show that I found myself feeling very cynical – thoughts like: sure, you have 7 billion dollars and you're giving away 100 million. Nice tax break. The feeling of distrust that came over me – what makes you think that money can solve Newark's problems. Listening to Mayor Booker talk about the accountability that must be part of this effort – maybe we're all a little cynical when politicians get involved. I wonder, though, if that cynicism shuts us down when God is calling us to get involved in justice and peace efforts. Is it naïve to take this project, these hopes and dreams for our neighbors in Newark, at face value? Maybe. But the challenge for me is not to shut down and stay on my side of the chasm and think nothing, do nothing.

I suspect the chasms in our relationships are the most difficult – look back at the parable: the rich man had no relationship with Lazarus in life and in death he only wanted to use him, to have Lazarus serve him. What a missed opportunity to get to know another human being! What opportunities do we miss?

I see that so often in my own life and in the lives of people with whom I interact. Especially at the time of a death in the family, all those chasms become so very obvious and it's too late to build bridges then. What opportunities are we missing today – now – in our families, in our workplaces, with the stranger we meet? To build relationships, to nurture relationships, with our brothers and sisters in Christ?

I've been haunted by the death of a young woman in Connecticut – she was one of my confirmands some years ago – she died alone of a drug overdose last weekend and since then I've been listening to her friends, her family, hearing their unspeakable pain. While officially she died of an accidental overdose, there's still the pain of this at one time self inflicted choice she made years ago – now, the aftermath of the disease of addiction we're all dealing with – a chasm surrounded Tabby – perhaps in her pain she created this chasm herself to protect from more pain.

The gift in all of this, though, is that bridges are being built among her friends, family, all those touched by her all too short life. What opportunities do we miss before it's too late.

Remember this: even after death, the rich man does not care about Lazarus – even in his torment he wants to use Lazarus as a servant. Abraham tells him, no – the chasm between you that you dug during your life has been impassable. The gulf by which you were comforted in life has become un-crossable. It's too late.

The truth is, the rich man needs Lazarus as much as Lazarus needs him. The independence that riches seem to bring is only an illusion – the rich man thinks he can afford not to see Lazarus lying outside his gate. The rich man lives under the illusion that we are individual islands – that being responsible only for ourselves is enough. When we are at our best selves, we know that's not true.

Jesus' parable points to something better for us – something better and more real – the reality that we are created not to be alone, but to love and be loved; not to be users of one another, but to be partners in the world. We were created not to dig chasms and let gulfs separate us, but to build bridges.

Who are we in this parable? We're not Lazarus, although we may be longing for something. We are not the rich man, though we may have more than we need of material possessions. We are the five brothers, the brothers and sisters of the rich man, still living, whom the rich man wishes to warn, to save from the torment of being on one side of the chasm; the torment of being separated from God; the torment of being able only to envision only using people, not loving them; and ignoring the poor, not serving them. We are the five brothers, in danger of waiting for some spectacular sign from God before we will take the message seriously.

All of us have someone sitting by our gates – someone who gives us the opportunity to fulfill the promises of our baptismal covenant, promises to seek and serve Christ in all people, to respect the dignity of every person.

We have a choice: to build bridges or dig chasms. We can choose to use that capacity to love now and not wait for heaven. We are responsible aren't we. And our choices to see, to notice, to serve, to love or not – our choices really do matter.

So, if you're bothered by this passage – good. That's a good sign.

Continue pursuing righteousness, faith, and love: feel uncomfortable, struggle with the question of what you're doing and not doing, feeling and not feeling. Struggle with how well you love your neighbors and how well you love God. Feel uncomfortable – but also feel assured – for the one who rose from the dead has promised to help, to forgive – and Jesus will be true to his promise. He doesn't expect any of us to do everything for everyone – only to do everything you can – and to trust him for the rest.

Perhaps the love of money is the root of all evil – but loving God, loving our neighbors – all our neighbors – as we love ourselves is the root of all goodness. Let's build some bridges and fill in those chasms. God is with us! Thanks be to God! Amen.

Let us pray:

Gracious God, in the power of the Holy Spirit, help us to go forth in the world to fulfill our calling as people of God, the body of Christ. Open us to be your bridges in a world where there is so much need. May each of us be called as partners in your service – may each of us respond. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.