

CROSSING CHASMS

SLIDE - CHASM

It looks impossible to cross this deep break in the earth. Is there any way to bridge the gap? A chasm is a cleft in the surface of the earth. Such breaks in the surface of the earth can be quite beautiful. They are a challenge for adventurers. Heroes in fictional stories often leap and cross the breach to save the day. But in our story today the chasms are breaches of trouble.

There are three chasms in the gospel text for today as Jesus tells a story to those who have sneered at him. They had heard his teachings about ones who are lost and then reconciled by the grace of God. They made fun of Jesus because they would rather justify themselves by their own standards. They didn't see how grace, mercy and compassion could win the day. They were not about to take Jesus seriously. Jesus tells another story which we read this week for our consideration. Will we take Jesus seriously?

SLIDE – PAINTING OF RICH MAN AND LAZARUS STORY

In general a chasm can also be a marked division or separation between two groups of people who are opposite of each other socially, economically or politically, for example. The story Jesus tells is stark. As people of faith we see there is a spiritual chasm between rich man and Lazarus which prevents the rich man from seeing the poor man lying at his gate day after day. There is the chasm in Hades between the rich man in torment and Lazarus in the loving embrace of Abraham. There is a chasm of faith that prevents the five brothers from mending their ways even though someone should rise from the dead. How will these chasms be crossed? Jesus will soon say in this gospel, "What is impossible for mortals is possible for God." Does this story point us to our need of Jesus?

SLIDE - PRODIGAL

Jesus is a skilled story teller. This is more than an isolated story. The rich man in today's story used his wealth only for self. The scriptures inform us that the use of money can be a problem or a blessing. "The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil." (1 timothy 6) Jesus addresses this multiple times in the parables of Luke. Recall Jesus' story of the Prodigal Son and his older brother and its lessons. The younger son squanders his funds and falls into the situation of having to learn what it means to be poor. A second lesson for him will be what it means to receive the benefits of benefactors. Receiving benefits is something we all learn as God's love comes to us.

God's love is first made clear in the waters of baptism, as by God's grace we are called and claimed as God's own children. We are promised forgiveness, belonging, community and God's Spirit. We are assured of God's presence and guidance for a lifetime and we live out life learning what it means to be a child of God as we grow in years.

The father in the story of the lost son learns that money does not buy love. The older son is left with still needing to learn how to use what he has. We might pray that those who need to learn how to use what they have figure out how to use what they have in praise of God and for the sake of the neighbor.

Next, Jesus tells a story of the Dishonest Manager. The manager in this story, like the younger son in the Prodigal tale, finds himself in peril financially. He has squandered money and resources. He will need to do something to secure his future. He decides to settle accounts of his employer by obtaining the principle of loans without the interest. In the end his boss is pleased with the manager's clever action to save face and make him, the boss, look good.

A third story of being in financial peril is the one of Lazarus today. Lazarus was placed at the gate of the rich man but he never found financial security. Lazarus longed to eat, just as the prodigal. But he was invisible to the rich man. In death, Lazarus will find himself in the loving embrace of Abraham.

SLIDE – SHARE, SAVE, SPEND

The rich man in today's story is in position to do something with his abundance, his wealth but he comes to understanding too late. When he had position, he did nothing. In the other stories I have referenced today, there is the character of a rich man who is in position to do things because of his wealth. The prodigal's father is generous, and in his generosity, he regains one son and perhaps another. The boss in the story of the Dishonest Manager is perceived to be generous and likely has his reputation lifted although if he had known the plan of the manager in advance, he would probably not have approved of it. He will live another day, perhaps in greater appreciation for the second chance he has been given. Who knows what effect it will have on his future relationships, might he begin to act with mercy and justice?

"There was a rich man..." the rich man is not going to be one who is a good example for life. The rich man in his lack of ability to see the suffering at a place he passes by every day is guilty of the sin of omission. He has failed to extend help to the poor. The rich man does not just have incredible wealth but he desires that people notice his wealth. His garments are made of the most expensive and luxurious cloth. His food is prepared by the best chefs who spare no costs. Every day is another day to indulge with no regard for others. He surely is not serving God or neighbor. He is the epitome of one who serves himself. He is spiritually blind to the suffering and the need of Lazarus whom he passes by every day.

To take Jesus seriously in this text is to wonder about our own ability to see, those of us who have enough and then some more. Are we stuck in indifference to the world around us? Are we able to look for suffering in the world with the intent to lessen it while working to establish compassion and mercy in its place? Are we able to see without God's Spirit? It seems to me to look for suffering or needs with the intent to alleviate these things is a good beginning.

SLIDE – GWOH LOGO

Today we celebrate God's Work. Our Hands. Sunday in Eau Claire with service projects in the community. Surely those who have planned this day have been looking for those who suffer and are in need. Surely those who have planned this day have had their eyes opened to things they had not seen before. The building of beds for children who have been sleeping on the floor is one example. Surely our combined efforts will benefit people, creation and community. Surely the continual planning of this day of service is opening our eyes to our status of having enough and then some, of needs in the area which we had not seen in previous years, and the many ways we can be of service that will be signs of compassion and mercy.

Is what we do this day bridging the gap in ways that are lasting? It seems to be the challenge this story moves us to is making visible the invisible suffering in the world. The extended work is to ensure that all people have what they need.

MIGRANT FATHER AND DAUGHTER

Images of suffering in the world are as close as our screens. Yet it is easy to discount these images as we struggle with boundaries. Yet one of the incredible statistics of our day is that there are about 65 million people displaced in the world because of war, climate change, food insecurity, violence and more. They

leave their homes in search of someplace where they can be safe or have what is needed for daily life. They put their own safety at risk in their searches. You may recognize these two as Oscar Alberto Martinez Ramirez and his daughter Valeria who drowned in the Rio Grande as they fled and searched. These images remind us that to have our eyes opened is not comfortable. There are no easy answers and there are issues and questions we should ask and discuss together.

SLIDE – CROSS

To see with eyes of faith the ones whom God loves, those who too often get labeled as unworthy or impure are received into the embrace of God no matter what their condition.

There is a chasm between the creator and the creation, between God and us. It is a chasm which we cannot cross on our own powers. The one true God, the God of Moses and the prophets, does prove his love for us in spectacular fashion. For Jesus the Christ is the one who is telling the story. In Jerusalem he will bridge the gap, the chasm of sin, evil and death by giving his life on the cross and rising again.

St. Paul writes, “But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life (Romans 5:8-10).

Jesus bridges the gap between God the Father and us. Jesus who becomes like us, human, invites and enables us to hear and believe the Word of God. Those who read and listen to the scriptures do believe and trust that Christ rose from the dead.

Those able to listen to the Word and believe and trust in the Word are given power by the Holy Spirit to live following the Word. Freed from the power of sin, life becomes something that we get to do.