



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
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## CHASM

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, August 14, 2016  
The Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost—Based on Luke 16:19-31*

The parable we just heard of the rich man and poor Lazarus is troubling. It's meant to be. Jesus was a master at telling parables, these short stories designed to trouble our waters just enough to get our attention.

Hearing a parable is like being given an odd, surprise gift. When we unwrap the gift, we don't find an object—a sweater, a tie, a coffee maker, a set of golf clubs. No, instead we find something unusual, which, if we look/listen closely, turns out to be an invitation. But what we're being invited to takes some figuring out.

Jesus uses parables as a way of inviting us to see things differently. So that maybe, just maybe, we may choose to live differently.

This parable of the rich man and Lazarus paints vivid, disquieting—even disgusting—images. On one side of the gate: the rich man—wearing the most expensive, elegant soft robes; feasting sumptuously not just once or twice a week, but every day. After each meal, servants bring fresh bread so the rich man can clean his hands with it, and then throw the used bread on the floor under the table.

On the other side of the gate: Lazarus—poor, covered with sores, dogs licking his sores. He can't walk on his own; he's been carried and left at the rich man's gate. Desperately hungry. So hungry he'd give anything just for one piece of that discarded bread under the rich man's table. But Lazarus has a name. He's the only one in any of Jesus' parables who has a name.

After both men die, more vivid images: Lazarus, carried by angels, being comforted by Father Abraham. The rich man, tormented in flames, desperately thirsty. Odd, isn't it, that suddenly the rich man now knows Lazarus' name? And not only knows his name, but tries to have Lazarus sent, like a servant, to warn the man's five brothers, presumably living the same kind of life, to change their ways. But Abraham (good for him) says No, they've already been warned. This parable has the feel of a wake-up call.

Jesus told this parable over 2,000 years ago. But we today know this rich man. We know Lazarus. We, especially those of us living/working/visiting here in NYC, see this rich man every day. We see Lazarus every day.

As our Bible Study group reflected on this parable this week, someone said: I saw Lazarus today. I want to help! But how can I help? The need seems so overwhelming. What can I do? I feel so helpless.

I saw the rich man today ... when I looked in the mirror this morning. I may not wear expensive designer clothes or eat at 5-star restaurants every day or live in a high-end luxury apartment. But compared to most of the world's population, I am this rich man.

We know this rich man. We know Lazarus. I believe we also know this great chasm to which Abraham refers. Whenever we recognize the staggering inequalities of wealth that exist here in our own country, much less in the world, we catch a glimpse of that chasm. Nicholas Kristof, in an op-ed piece in this past Thursday's *New York Times*, noted: In the past 20 years, the number of people in the world living in extreme poverty (\$1.90 per person per day) has been cut in half. So has the number of small children dying. That's six million lives a year saved by vaccines, promotion of maternal health, pneumonia and other medical treatments, mosquito netting. That's because many, many people in organizations like our own Episcopal Relief and Development have worked intentionally and faithfully to shrink that chasm. "Historians may conclude that the most important thing going on in the world in the early 21st century was a stunning decline in human suffering."

<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/22/opinion/the-best-news-you-dont-know.html?rref=collection%2Fcolumn%2FNicholas%20Kristof&action=click&contentCollection=Opinion&module=Collection&region=Marginalia&src=me&version=column&pgtype=article>

Another chasm, that of pervasive racial inequality in this country, has become more and more visible in recent years, especially since Ferguson. It's not limited to Ferguson, of course—or to Cleveland, Florida, Charleston, Baltimore, New York, Dallas, Tulsa, Charlotte, or hundreds of other places that haven't made the headlines. A painful, shameful chasm. Many, many people of all faiths and goodwill are working to shrink/eradicate this chasm of racial inequality, or to build a path through it.

This parable is troubling ... and yet, it is sending us an invitation.

Given that today at St. Bart's we are baptizing three little ones [9am: Francis; 11am: Olivia and Lucas] and we're recognizing and commissioning all St. Bart's Liturgical Ministers, I might have preferred a more cheery Gospel, like the one of Jesus gently carrying the lost lamb on his shoulders. But we have this parable.

Actually, there's a powerful connection among this parable, the baptisms, and our Liturgical Ministers.

Any time even one person is baptized here, we all stand and reaffirm our Baptismal Covenant, which includes five Baptism promises. The Great Commandments give us our job description as Christians: Love the Lord with all you have; love your neighbor as yourself; love your enemies. Our five Baptism promises give us a blueprint for *how* to do our job:

- Continue in the apostle's teaching and fellowship, and in the prayers (i.e. keep coming to church)
- Persevere in resisting evil, and whenever (not IF, but WHEN) you fall into sin, repent (turn around, change your thinking, live differently) and return to the Lord.
- Proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ (how we act not just in big ways but in our everyday lives matters: how we speak and act to our neighbors ... and our enemies)
- Seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself (we recognize Lazarus as a person, recognize the rich man as a person, as fellow human beings)
- Strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being (Where is it we see a chasm? What will we do to shrink/eradicate it ... or to forge a path across it?)

The little ones being baptized here today aren't old enough to make these promises for themselves. So their parents and godparents make the promises for them. When the little ones are old enough, they will take on these promises for themselves, having learned from the examples of their parents, godparents—and from all of us.

This parish of St. Bart's thrives not only because of clergy and staff, but because literally hundreds of people contribute their time, talent, and treasure to the ministries of this community, to make St. Bart's a welcoming, vibrant house of worship for renewal of spirit and service to this city and beyond.

We plan to recognize and commission all of these folks over this next year. We're starting today with our Liturgical Ministers, by which we mean anyone who has a hand in making St. Bart's services every day of the week not just possible, but beautiful, powerful, and welcoming.

Serving at St. Bart's is one way our Liturgical Ministers are living out their Baptismal promises. Not the only way. Many of these people are carrying out their baptismal promises in other ways, too, outside these doors.

Jesus continues to send us invitations. They often come oddly wrapped as troubling parables, but make no mistake— they are invitations.

May God give us the grace and courage to wrestle honestly with these invitations. And to find ways to say YES. YES to these invitations to live in ways that help bring about God's dream on earth: God's dream of abundant life for all. Amen.

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