

**A FIXED CHASM
PSALM 1; 1 TIMOTHY 6:6-12, 17-19; LUKE 16:16-31
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
SEPTEMBER 29, 2019**

Psalm 1

¹Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers;

²but their delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law they meditate day and night.

³They are like trees planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.

⁴The wicked are not so,
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

⁵Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;

⁶for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.

1 Timothy 6:6-19

⁶Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; ⁷for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; ⁸but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. ⁹But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains. ¹¹But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. ¹²Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

¹⁷As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. ¹⁸They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share,

¹⁹thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

Luke 16:19-31

¹⁹“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²²The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’ ²⁵But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you

are in agony. ²⁶Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’ ²⁷He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house— ²⁸for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ ²⁹Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ ³⁰He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ ³¹He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

Sermon

Each of us has things we tell ourselves
to shield us from the pain of those around us.
If only he had not dropped out of high school.
If only she hadn’t had so many babies.
If only he would just learn more English.
If only she would only stop drinking.
It’s human nature to want some reason
why people are the way they are...
because if we know THAT
we can get on with the business of living our lives
without too much weight on our consciences.

Most of us learned a long time ago
that the main person we’re responsible for is ourselves.
We’ve been put on this earth to LOVE our neighbors...
but as far as/actually CHANGING them or their lot in life...
well, that’s up to them, not us.
This is especially true in a culture like ours
that puts so much stock in individual initiative.
The great American myth
is that anyone who’s willing to put forth the effort and work hard
can win first prize in the race.
And that MIGHT BE true
if everyone were standing at the same starting line
when the gun went off.
But that is never the case.
The fact is that some start from so far back
that they can run until their lungs burst
and never even see the dust of the front runners.
Those are the hardest cases, I think...
people who have inherited poverty
as surely as they have inherited brown eyes or curly hair.
Our Good Samaritan volunteers learn this pretty quickly –
there are those who hear the starting gun go off
and have no clue which way to run.
Not that it really matters...

they don't have the right shoes
and can't pay the registration fee.
They never got a copy of the rules...
and are in terrible shape anyway.
Other people look at them and think "losers".

This has been going on for so long
that some folks have come to believe
that the difference between themselves and others
is SO great it's almost like God had something to do with it. Maybe their misfortune is no
mistake.

Maybe it's God's punishment for their sins.
Or maybe those who do have more
have it because God likes them better.
It is even written in the Bible:
"For to those who have, more will be given;
and from those who do not have,
even what they seem to have will be taken away." (Luke 8:18)

This was a popular view in Jesus' day;
especially among the rich.
And what's worse,
they had no trouble finding passages of scripture
to back them up.
For instance, Deuteronomy 26
promises fertility and prosperity and victory in war
to those who obey the Lord.
And as you heard earlier when Katherine read Psalm 1 –
that the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.

Verses like these
were used by first-century religious people
to link wealth with God's favor...
so that mammon was not seen as a bad thing at all...
matter of fact, it was a very good thing
because it was a sure sign of God's approval/pleasure.

Those who obeyed God
were blessed with land and animals and food and children...
and those who did not were condemned to poverty.
It was an idea that worked out nicely on two counts.
First, it allowed the rich to enjoy their riches;
and second, it allowed them to walk past the beggars
without even looking down.

After all, who were they to interfere
with the way God had arranged things?

No, the best thing was to leave well enough alone.
After all, the poor have bootstraps...
let them pull themselves up and dust themselves off.
Let them try harder to do right and not sin...
and then... maybe then...
God will smile upon them too.
Meanwhile, the gap between rich and poor continued to widen.
It wasn't anyone's fault - it was God's doing.
And that, as they say, was that!

In case you're wondering –
it's called "health and wealth theology"
and let me tell you, it is still very much with us today!
Yet, let me tell you something else –
Jesus couldn't stand it!
He couldn't stand that way of reading scripture...
he couldn't stand how the rich cherry-picked the passages
to justify their place...
because he knew there was so much in Moses and the prophets
that went the other way.
Only/But those were not the passages that rich people memorized:
passages like "Open your hand
to the poor and needy neighbor in your land"
(Deuteronomy 15:11)
or "Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker,
but those who are kind to the needy honor him"
(Proverbs 14:31).
Passages like these made it clear that
– far from judging the poor –
God actually identified with them...
- that to walk past a beggar was to walk past God,
and woe to the rich person who did.

Well, as usual, Jesus' way of getting his message across
was to tell a story.
I think you'll agree it's a pretty awful story –
with oozing sores... slobbering dogs...
the place of torment... the great chasm.
When most of us hear it,
we immediately descend into our own chasm of guilt
even though that is not Jesus' point.
Let me say that again –
making wealthy folk like us feel guilty
is not the point of the story.
The point of the story is to tell us a truth we need to know
in hopes that it will change our lives NOW.

Otherwise, God could care less about our guilt –
especially if guilt is no more than a passing emotion.
The only thing guilt is good for is to move us to change...
to change NOW!
And if it doesn't do that,
it's just a sorry substitute for new life.
"I can't do what you're asking me, God,
but I sure do feel bad about it.
Do I get points for that? Lord, will you settle for that?"

Well, for better or worse, there is very little guilt in this story.
The rich man doesn't feel bad about anything
except where he ended up –
where his life of luxury has landed him.
On earth, his gated mansion
provided some much-appreciated distance
between him and Lazarus –
and he liked that.
But now that the distance seems fixed for good,
he is in distress...
especially because Lazarus has something he really wants.

Some of you may know the Cotton Patch version of this parable
which goes like this:

"Oh, Father Abraham, Send me my water boy.
Water boy! Quick! I'm just about to perish down here.
I need a drink of water.'
That old rich guy had always hollered for his water boy:
'Boy, bring me water!
Boy, bring me this! Boy, bring me that!
Get away, boy! Come here, boy!'"¹

Even on the far side of the grave,
the rich man can't see Lazarus as a fellow human being.
He still sees him as something less.
He thinks of Lazarus as Father Abraham's gofer...
someone to fetch water and take messages –
but Father Abraham sets him straight.
Cradling an old, bony Lazarus in his bosom,
he says no, no, and no.
The rich man's days of getting other people
to do his bidding are over.
Furthermore, there will be no special messages
brought back from the dead for his brothers.
They have Moses and the prophets
just like everybody else...
and if that is not enough to get their attention,

then no ghost is going to get it either.

I told you it was an awful story.

But remember: because it is Jesus who is telling it,
it is a story that is for us, not against us.

Even when Jesus gets angry,
he gets angry for a reason.

And usually it's because he couldn't stand the way
people loved the things they could get for themselves
better than they loved the things God wanted to give them.

They were satisfied with linen suits and sumptuous feasts,
when God wanted to give them the kingdom.

They were content to live in the world with beggars and "boys,"
when God wanted to give them brothers and sisters.

They were happy to get by with the parts of the Bible
that backed up their own ways of life,
when God wanted to give them a new life altogether.

What they did not seem to know

– what WE still do not seem to know –
is that we are the victims of our own way of life.

When we succeed in cutting ourselves off from each other...
when we learn how to live with the misery of other people
by convincing ourselves that they deserve it...
when we defend our own good fortune as God's blessing
and refuse to see how our lives
are quilted together with all other lives...
then we are the losers.

Not because of what God will do to us...

but because of what we have done to ourselves.

Who do you think fixed that chasm in the story?

Was it God... or the rich man?

Sometimes I think the worst thing we ever have to fear
is that God will give us exactly what we want.

Well, the best thing about this story

is that it's not over yet.

For the rich man, yes, but not for us... WHY?

Because we are the five brothers.

We are the rich man's brothers and sisters...

and even though Father Abraham

would not let Lazarus come back from the grave
to tell us this story,

Jesus has sneaked it out for us.

So that now... in addition to Moses and the prophets...

we have someone who has risen from the dead

to convince us it is true.
All that remains to be seen
is what we will do about it.

Note: 1. Clarence Jordan and Bill Lane Doulos, *Cotton Patch Parables of Liberation* (Scottsdale, Penn.: Herald Press, 1976), 67.