

The 19th Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 21/Lectionary 26 (C)
September 25, 2022
Text: Luke 16:19-31

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I have two especially strong memories of the terrible heat wave that hit us here in Portland a year ago at the end of June. First, I was completely shocked that it could get so hot in June. In years past, it seemed like we were usually watching the weather anxiously in June to see whether it would be warm enough for Vacation Bible School. But last year, Portland got up to 116°, and I vividly remember how oppressively, dangerously hot it felt. I was thankful I didn't have to be working outside in that heat. My second strong memory is how shocked and sad I felt hearing later that, in Multnomah County, 72 people died from the heat in June. Across the Pacific Northwest, nearly 800 people died from the heat. And the overwhelming majority of those who died were poor, elderly and alone.

It's a sobering and clarifying reminder, not only that many of our neighbors live in very vulnerable situations, but also that being connected to other people and having a supportive network around you can make all the difference. Connection can be the difference between life and death, and connection is what our gospel story for today is all about. Jesus tells an unsettling story with two main characters. There's a rich man who was completely self-involved, pampering himself with every luxury he could get, while turning a blind eye to the needs of others. And there was also a poor man. His name was Lazarus, and his life was little more than suffering. And there was a huge chasm between the two of them. There was no connection between them at all.

But in Jesus' story, when they both died, their situations were reversed. The rich man suffered in torment in Hades, while Lazarus was comforted in Paradise. Their circumstances had changed completely, but the gap remained. In fact, on the other side of death, the gap was so big that it was impossible for anyone to cross over, to get from one side to the other. The gap had become permanent. Jesus tells this story to shake us up and wake us up. This story isn't a picture of "the way things will be" after death. It is a warning to watch out for the gap—not a gap in the future, between Paradise and Hades. It's a warning to watch out for the gaps right now, the gaps in our lives and the gaps in our world—gaps that separate and isolate people and make it impossible for them to be connected.

In particular, Jesus warns us about the potential for wealth to break the sense of connection between people. I think it's important to notice that Jesus doesn't say wealth is bad, or that money is evil. But it can be dangerous. Remember in our parable last week, Jesus urged us to use whatever we've got for good. Use it to make a difference—share it, feed someone with it, build something with it, meet a need with it, do something good with it, or give it away. Just don't hoard it and think only about your own wants and desires, because then that wealth will consume your heart. It will make it difficult for you to recognize the real connection between yourself and others. And that's what makes money and wealth dangerous, because being deeply connected to other people is the difference between life and death.

Jesus knows that cultivating these human connections can be challenging. They might require patience, or forgiveness, or sacrifice on our part. They might require dealing with discomfort, or changing our mind or values or priorities. But being fully alive and engaged in life can't happen when we attend only to our own wants and needs and desires, or when we live only for our own comfort. A fully human life needs community, where we're connected in meaningful ways to each other—encouraging each other through difficult times, rejoicing together when something good happens, grieving with each other when we experience loss and pain. The life God intends for us doesn't include gaps that separate us and isolate us from other children of God.

On your way into church this morning, perhaps you noticed some of our modern-day Lazaruses. Some of them are living in the three tents on the sidewalk along Irving Street, just on the other side of this wall. And there are many more in neighborhoods all across the city. I don't believe Jesus would in any way romanticize their situation, or suggest that their poverty has some hidden blessing, or ignore the role that mental illness or addiction may play in their plight, or encourage the rest of us to leave our homes and sleep under a bridge somewhere. But Jesus does want to utterly demolish any sense that we are unconnected to our neighbors who are poor or suffering or homeless. Jesus wants to make sure that we see our homeless, or mentally ill, or addicted neighbors as neighbors, and never as people on the other side of some unbridgeable chasm, people we are completely unrelated to. Connection is the difference between life and death.

Everywhere we look, we can see the gaps—between rich and poor, gaps that separate communities according to race, gaps that separate churches according to politics. It seems like we are living in a time when a sense of community, that sense of belonging to each other and being responsible for each other, is shrinking. Across the gaps of class and race, religion and ideology, there is frighteningly little sense of being fellow children of God, being neighbors to each other, bound by shared humanity to care for each other, to act with compassion and generosity and forgiveness for each other. Instead, it feels like the gaps are growing and hardening, reinforced by fear or entitlement.

But children of God, what God began in Jesus, and God is now continuing through us as Christ's living presence in the world, is making this poor, torn creation whole, stitching together the shredded fabric of the human family, and closing the gaps. The entirety of Jesus' life and work was and is about bridging the gap between God and us, between us and each other, forgiving us and reconciling us and restoring us to relationship with each other, because connection is the difference between life and death, and God is all about connection.

I pray that as you leave this place, you take that sense of connection with you, and that you feel more fully and truly alive because you know you are connected to all of God's creation and the whole human family. No, it's not all beautiful, but it's what is, and it's all loved by God, and it's where God's Spirit is at work to make connections, to bring healing and reconciliation. And you are part of it. Thanks be to God. Amen.