

## Having Words with Jesus

Why do we tell stories? For lots of reasons, you're no doubt thinking. We tell stories to share experiences, to teach lessons, to create community, to reveal ourselves, to gain attention, to lighten a heavy moment, or . . . lots of reasons. Stories have power and have an effect beyond the words of the story. Stories shape our experience of the world; they shape us in that world. Sometimes, stories dream of a world that could be or might be. Everyone leans in when stories are told.

So, why did Jesus tell stories? For all the reasons above, no doubt. Something is happening when Jesus tells stories, something beyond the words of the stories themselves. Even when the words are hard to hear.

Let's face it, sometimes talking with Jesus is a difficult task. Or maybe we should say, listening to Jesus can sometimes be hard. Jesus has a way of getting to difficult, hard-to-hear issues quickly and easily. Sometimes it is in a story where he is revealing to us our own secret sins; other times, it is the answer to a question that catches us in our prejudice or blindness. Sometimes, it is a teaching that we struggle to wrap our heads around. These are his words - words we believe are valuable, words with which we need to wrestle, words that we need, somehow, to learn to live by.

Our September series is called "Having Words with Jesus" to reflect a variety of moods and meanings. Maybe we want to argue, or turn away, or give up. Or maybe we really want to know, to spend some time in his presence to understand and to explore, and finally, we hope, to hear. This is a call to listen again, even to the more difficult passages that we sometimes want to skip over. Join in this month as we have words with Jesus in worship.

## Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Counting the Cost

September 4, 2022 – [Luke 14:25-33](#)

Color: Green

### PLANNING NOTES

It is not the goal of this series to explain away difficult sayings of Jesus; neither is the aim to make things more difficult than they are. We can sit at Jesus' feet and wrestle with these words, much like the first hearers did. Like them, we can grab hold of the things that seem clear and contemplate what doesn't make sense on our first hearing. We need to give the word time to settle within us. We need to listen multiple times, perhaps from many translations. The worship team might partner with various Bible study groups for this series. You could assign all the texts for the series to groups who will then share insights and understandings. Maybe print some interpretations or interesting takes on the words in the bulletin or as a handout for folks coming into worship. Or start an online conversation around the texts through social media or an email chain just so that folks are ready to worship having been exposed to this word ahead of time.

Even during worship, if there is time and space, you could have multiple readers, or multiple translations. The same text could be read more than once with some silence for consideration afterward; perhaps a modified *lectio divina* could take place during the reading of the word. Let the text speak for itself before interpretation. Then have a time of laity reflection before the preacher speaks. Ask two or three members of the congregation to reflect on the words, share what they heard, or say something about how they reacted to this challenge that comes from Jesus. And this is not an adversarial presentation, a debate, or argument. This is a conversation, a sharing and listening. We are having words with Jesus.

We also remember that Jesus is the Word made flesh, the very embodiment of the words we read. So, our music and our liturgy can celebrate and embrace the living Word that is the Christ we worship. The Word defines us, transforms us into the followers of Jesus that we are longing to be. This first week of this "Having Words" series is a great time to remind ourselves of the commitment that we made to make and to be made into disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Do we understand how all-encompassing that is for our lives? Jesus is asking us to count the cost, to consider the radical change, the radical difference we are called to make, and to live in a world with different priorities. Are we ready and willing to make the sacrifices necessary to live this life? Maybe this is time for a call to commitment, like the Wesleyan Covenant prayer we pray at the beginning of the year. "I am no longer my own, but thine" (*United Methodist Hymnal*, 607). This is the challenge that Jesus is giving to us today. What must we give up to be his disciples?

## PREACHING NOTES

After my mom died, we had to move Dad into a facility nearer to us. But that left the house that they had lived in for many years. So, my brothers and sister and I all went to Tennessee to attack Dad's house, to see if we could get it to the state where it would look presentable to someone who might want to buy it. It was a daunting task. But we chipped away, bit by bit, load by load, five trips to the recycling center in town, four trips to the Resale Shop off the courthouse square, and one big truckload to the dump on the edge of town. At the end of the week, the place was transformed. It looked like a real house instead of the dumping ground it had become. We had a sense of accomplishment, a sense of bringing order out of chaos, a sense of moving forward to the next chapter in all our lives. "Good has been done here," as Bob the Tomato has been known to say in the *Veggie Tale* videos we watched with the kids years ago. Good has been done here.

Wait, did I say dumping ground? That's a bit unfair. I mean, sure it seemed like junk, and a lot of it was junked. But it was more; it was memories, years and years of memories. It was life lived, not just one life — my mom now resting in the arms of her savior or my dad, now unsettled in a new place back in Indiana, whose life had been turned upside down in a matter of days. Yes, they were present in all the detritus of those two from whom we all sprang; but there were more, lines of family back through the years, farther than we could countenance as we sifted through the piles, family we knew in the dim recesses of experience and family we had only speculated about, heard stories about, and even family we didn't recognize, and couldn't pin down as belonging to any particular branch. There was family galore, family abundant—some long gone and others lost in the busyness of living a life apart; some a Christmas card acquaintance at best. But family.

Not just family. Those memories included family of a different sort—families of covenant and not blood, of faith and not shared history, except for the history of now, or of at one time. There were representations of churches in many states and eras, groups and structures that jangled dim recognition, and others that rang clearly even through our weary fog. There were representations of gatherings of people from eras long gone, with funny hair and clothes that seem too outdated to be retro. Yet, they were smiling and holding on to one another, closer than people usually are in most places, like they genuinely enjoyed one another's company, as if they belonged together in a way deeper than shared DNA—as if they would be there for one another when push came to shove, no questions asked.

We didn't know most of them. At least we didn't know their names or what church they came from or what era they belonged to. We didn't know if we were alive when the photos were taken. Yet we knew them. We knew that they had been a part of the church, part of the flock, part of the family of followers, of disciples. Because in addition to the joy, there was a seriousness about those faces. And rightly so.

Then Jesus comes along and tells us to hate our mothers and fathers in order to follow him. Um. Can I go back to cleaning out the house? Why did he say this? Was it because there was a large crowd following him? Did he turn around and get scared by all of them and then think, “What can I do to thin the herd?” Why does Jesus have to make it so hard to follow him? He says, “Follow me,” but we’ve got to leave everything behind to do so. Why? Why can’t we add it to our long list of other interests? Our overfull schedule of appointments and good deeds? Why can’t Jesus be satisfied with giving him what time we have to give? At least that’s something, right? At least we’re giving it a try. When we can. When nothing else is going on. When the kids aren’t in town. When we haven’t been out too late the night before and that dopey pastor put the real worship service at an hour before God gets out of bed! Surely that ought to count for something.

“Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes and even life itself, cannot be my disciple” (14:26). Um. Not going to happen. Let’s be honest here. It just isn’t. At least in the usual way we understand those words and that experience and those emotions. We’re good at hating, frankly. But this list isn’t the one we use to list the objects of our hate. Okay, maybe moments we get angry enough at them. Maybe we know of those whose home experience is so terrifying that hate is the only human response to the abuse and neglect they have received. But that’s not most of us. And it seems to me that there are other places where Jesus tells us to love and care for one another, to forgive over and over, to not condemn, to . . . Well, you get the point. This passage doesn’t jibe with our overall understanding of what Jesus asks us to do. It just doesn’t.

So, we have two possible responses. One is to just pretend we didn’t read it. I know, you smiled at that one, didn’t you? We say, “We can’t do that!” But we do it all the time. We pretend Jesus didn’t say a lot of things that he said. We just focus on the doable stuff, the stuff we like, the stuff that affirms us as we are. And bleep over the unpronounceable words in the larger text. But, and let’s be clear, I’m not advocating that approach. Even though I’m as guilty as any.

This leaves us with response number two: go back to the text and wrestle with it a little while. Maybe there is something there, a hint, a translation error, an editorial gloss we can undo and get back to something that lets us breathe a little bit better. Or, failing that (and believe me, I hunted for a long time for something like that—no luck), we listen again, trying to find some meaning that is escaping us. We wrestle, like Jacob at Jabbok’s Ford, and risk coming away with a limp because we’ve seen the face of God.

Skip ahead. We’ll come back to that sticky verse. The bulk of the passage is two parables about making plans, about counting the cost. One is a king going to war or preparing for a war that is coming and deciding whether he can wage this war or he needs to sue for peace. The other is a construction worker who is building a tower and needs to know whether he has the means to finish it. Jesus is clearly asking the large crowd behind him whether they really want to make this journey, whether they want to fight the battle that is coming, whether they want to build the tower that he wants them to build. Are you in or not in? And let’s be clear, it isn’t going to

be a walk in the park. This is a battle for your own and everyone else's soul; this is nothing less than the construction of the kingdom of God going on within and around you. Are you committed to this transformation? Are you willing to invest the blood, sweat, and tears it is going to take?

"Sure," we shout, confident souls that we are. At least right now, in this moment, safe and secure from all alarms. But when the going gets tough, then what? When we stumble and fall, then what? When tragedy strikes, then what? That's what he is asking us to consider. And when we sober up to the reality of the question, we can say, "We want to. But what will it take?" And he'll answer, "Give up everything. Everything. Every thing. Father, mother, wife, children . . ." Everything is a daunting list. Your own life. Your pride and greed, your gifts and talents, the things that give you joy, and the things that make you roll your eyes and sigh. Everything. Give it up.

You can't be serious. He can't be serious. Ah, but he is. Give it up. And follow him. Carry his cross on which hangs father, mother, wife, children, you own life . . . Everything. Here's what he asks: "Don't love them with your love; love them with mine. Don't cling to people or things because they meet your needs or serve you. Receive them as a gift from the one you follow."

Because we can't love them like they need to be loved. We can't even love them like we want to love them. But in his love, we can love the way he loves. Compared to his love working through us, ours is feeble and broken and selfish and temporary and almost looks like hate. So, give that kind of love up. It doesn't serve. Instead, we can love as he loves. We can see through his eyes; we can serve with his hands. Then when we pick up, in his love, those we call family, we find more than what we thought we had. Then when we begin to build, we might actually finish, even as we are being finished in him.

## Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Finding the Lost

September 11, 2022 – [Luke 15:1-10](#)

Color: Green

### PLANNING NOTES

This text would not be considered one of the difficult sayings of Jesus by most folks. We are happy to look for the lost. We are happy that Jesus, at least, is willing to venture out to find those who have strayed and to bring them home for a celebration. This is a warm and welcoming sort of passage for us—at least until we look deeper and consider the radical preference for the outcast, for the wanderer, for the sinner. Experiments in local churches with a focus not on those already in the fellowship but on those not yet a part are often met with dismay by the membership. It is not unreasonable, most would think, to care for those who are members, those who pay the bills, those who are faithful to the programs of the church. Until Luke chapter 15 rolls around, and we discover just how unreasonable Jesus really is. It is one thing to be “seeker-sensitive,” which means being hospitable to those who find their way into our fellowship for worship or learning or support. But this isn’t about waiting by the door for those who come in; this is about going out, finding those who might not consider coming to a church, and making sure they know how welcome they are, how loved they are. This is about turning the church upside down or inside out in order to shift the focus from tending the flock to seeking the lost. This is a hard saying, indeed.

This message needs to be presented plainly, not to place guilt or add to a burden upon those who have already found a home in the body of Christ. If we can borrow a line from the third story in Luke 15, “You are always with me, and everything I have is yours.” We celebrate our place in the fellowship of the church. We live the party that is the kingdom of heaven right now. We claim the family that the kin-dom of God has given to us. We rejoice in the gift of the church that we enjoy as a part of our identity.

Yet we celebrate this gift as a treasure to be shared, not a right to be hoarded, not a due that is owed to us. But where do we begin as we gather for worship today? By asking God to open our eyes to the possibilities all around us, to the people we have overlooked, to the populations on the margins. Do our prayers cover only ourselves, our own needs, or our own forgiveness? Or are we lifting up our community and the opportunities for mission and ministry, evangelism, and comfort that we could provide? For whom do we pray?

What about erecting a prayer wall? Somewhere in the sanctuary or in the narthex or commons area, set up a place where people can post prayer concerns for the world around them. Post-it-notes or markers on newsprint paper could be available to any and all to draw attention, to help the whole congregation see the folks who are around them yet often overlooked. See all the people.

Do our songs celebrate the joys of the church and the gifts we have received? Or do we look out to the mission field, to the ravines where the sheep have wandered, or to the corners where the coin has rolled? Do we sing praise to the one who calls us to go out, to seek and to find and then to celebrate? Worship is not only about receiving marching orders or getting our weekly assignments. But it can be a reminder that we are a people with a mission and that we cannot be content with the status quo.

## **PREACHING NOTES**

One summer, when I was in middle school (actually, it was called junior high in my day—that's how old I am), my dad took me camping—just me, not my two brothers or my sister or mom, just me. I felt pretty special, to be honest. We had a great time that summer.

It was also one of those summers when the seventeen-year locusts were out. We got to the campground and rolled down the window to pay the entrance fee and heard a roar that sounded like the thunder of a massive waterfall or a jet engine before take-off. It was the locusts, singing the song they kept buried for seventeen years. We got used to it, after all, the white noise you no longer notice. What we didn't get used to was the short life span of the creatures and how they would drop from the trees when their songs were done. It was like a slow rainfall on the canvas roof of our tent, thumping like an irregular heartbeat as we tried to sleep. We also had to keep watch during mealtime, lest there be added protein dropping onto our plates or into our bowls.

The upside to this insect precipitation was that the fish were ready to jump at anything tossed into the lake. We barely had time to drop a hook into the water before a fish was ready to be pulled in. We caught more fish that week than we had ever done so before or since. We had to keep watch on the limits to make sure we weren't going over the line. The fish were just begging to be found.

Jesus had been hearing the white noise of complaint buzzing over him for some time now. "He is seen in the company of the wrong people!" "He is just way too friendly with those folks." Buzz, buzz, buzz. Dropping hints from behind hands and raised eyebrows like dead bugs from trees.

So, Jesus tells a story. A couple of stories. Well, three, but we'll leave the last one for another time. He gathers the crowd and the eavesdroppers to whom he is really talking. And he says, "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, leaves them . . ." Now we aren't told who is in the crowd. There are probably not any farmers or shepherds. But even those who are there know what the right answer is. None of us! Let's talk about acceptable losses. Let's discuss depreciation. Jesus, you may know woodworking and messiah-ing, but you're not a rancher. That would be crazy: leaving ninety-nine sheep unprotected to go off looking for one wanderer.

Just crazy. And let's talk about this woman and her lost coin. She sweeps the house—good idea—and when she finds the coin, she throws a party for all her friends and neighbors, which is going to cost more than the coin was worth. She would have come out ahead just holding on to the nine coins. Oh, sure, we can convince ourselves that this isn't just a coin, but a dowry, or a special headdress that somehow signaled her worth to the whole world, and without it would have been like smiling with a missing tooth. That may be true, but it isn't really clear in the text. The word is *drachma*, a significant coin, to be sure. It may represent a tenth of her life savings or even her whole family's life savings or generations of family, perhaps.

But still, it seems excessive, this party-throwing response to the finding. The coin that rolled off the table into a hidden crevice, or the sheep that followed its nose into a gully or the edge of the wilderness—what makes them worth all the effort? That's the question Jesus is posing to the crowd and mostly to the eavesdroppers who are complaining about his priorities.

Then, let's talk about strategy. There is a lot of effort involved in this seeking. The shepherd risks life and limb to find this wandering sheep, putting at risk the ninety-nine who know better. The woman lights a light and sweeps the whole house, puts in overtime, extra effort to find this coin. And neither the coin nor the sheep have expressed any desire to be found, let's be honest. We're happy to fish when the fish practically are jumping into the boat, taking the measly bait we offer with little effort on our part. We're good with that. We like the lost who find their own way back. In fact, a lot of our evangelism efforts are based on that premise – that they'll find their own way back, or at least they'll ask to be found.

Jesus seems to be suggesting a different approach, or a different understanding, or maybe a different relationship. Yeah, that's it: a different relationship. Jesus sends us seeking. That's why these stories qualify as hard words. We're given work to do, effort to extend; and we are given an attitude in which we expend this energy. We're seeking with joy. We're seeking something precious, something essential. And then when we find those we are seeking, we celebrate. We don't condemn and judge and point fingers and put them in time out until they measure up to our own personal standards. "We rejoice," Jesus says.

It's not our text for this week, but it isn't until the third story that the ninety-nine sheep left behind and the nine coins still sitting in their proper place get to speak. It's in the voice of the older brother, who complains, who pouts, who declares that this found one isn't worth the party we're throwing here. It doesn't reflect well on the eavesdroppers, on the righteous ones who don't need a search party, who don't step out of line. And then the shepherd who seeks and the woman who sweeps, and the father who searches the horizon every single day says, "You are always with me and everything I have is yours."

Why should we throw a party for the found ones? Because we live in a party every single day. Because celebration is our *modus operandi*, our regular habit. We are the party people! So, of course, we throw a party. Otherwise, all our mumbling is insect white noise, buzzing away in

the background, fit to be ignored. "Rejoice with me," says the seeker, "for the lost have been found."

## **Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Debts Are Tossed**

**September 18, 2022 – [Luke 16:1-13](#)**

**Color: Green**

### **PLANNING NOTES**

It is important to stress that the text for this week is not advocating a financial plan for followers of Christ. On the one hand, this is about priorities; on the other, it is about paying attention to the details. For the former, there is the call to approach the economic structures of this world not as end in itself, but as a means to create community – “make friends with dishonest wealth.” And for the latter, there is the reminder that one must be faithful in small things as a prelude to faithfulness in all things.

Worship could begin with a call to walk in the light of the Lord, to pay attention to the choices we make each day. We could call for confession of the little compromises we make, almost without thinking, and ask God’s forgiveness for straying from the path. That forgiveness is freeing, a release from debts we didn’t even know we had, as well as the ones that have become burdens on our souls. The words of assurance that follow our prayer of confession promise the power of the Spirit to work in us and through us so that we can live a life of holiness.

It is this partnership that we can celebrate as well. We speak first of the friend we call Jesus who is the one who redeems us. “What a friend we have in Jesus,” we sing. But also, of the Spirit who sustains and then connects us into a fellowship of love. We are one in the Spirit, bound together in the body of the church. What a fellowship, what a joy divine! We celebrate the church today. We acknowledge that our faith is worked out not in solitude but in relationship. We are blessed to have companions in Christ.

However, if we simply embrace the friends we have in the church, we will miss the sharp edge of the text for today. We are called to develop and nurture friendships with the neighbors all around us, not simply to fill our pews and sustain our church, but to engage in building the kingdom through radical hospitality. We, like the Christ we follow, are to love all God’s children, especially those who have no idea that they are indeed children of God.

Worship needs a vision that looks first to God and then to community within and then to the world beyond the walls. We are driven by the question, “How do we share this gift of faith?” We are constantly seeking ways to be a witness to the treasure we have found, to the joy we live.

## PREACHING NOTES

Keep reading. That's the best advice for dealing with this text. Don't stop at verse 13. Sure, the lectionary thinks that the verses assigned are a complete story and enough context for you to craft a powerful sermon. And as usual, the lectionary is correct. There is enough here—more than enough to be honest—to preach this text powerfully and effectively. It also fits well within the idea of this series, "Having Words with Jesus." These are difficult words that need some artful presentation to deal with the furrowed brows in the congregation after reading the assigned verses.

But keep reading anyway—at least one more verse. "The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all of this, and they ridiculed him" (Luke 16:14). Uh oh. Let me hasten to insert here that this isn't supposed to be another opportunity to hate on the Pharisees. There is far too much of that in our preaching. It's a lazy approach and allows us to squirm out from under the gaze of the one who is calling us to examine our own hearts. Reading verse 14 is supposed to catch all of us who heard the parable of the dishonest manager. We all rolled our eyes, or raised our brows, or snorted at the hyperbole that Jesus tosses out here. So, we too ridiculed him in our own somewhat respectful way.

We too are lovers of money, more than we'd like to admit. So, this parable is one with which we all must wrestle. Let's be honest, even the text itself wrestles with the parable. Verse 8 introduces what some commentators consider "a gloss" on the text by emphasizing the way the world is. Then verses 10 through 13 seem to be a contradiction to the very point of the text, which seemed to be to act "shrewdly." The gospel writer (or writers/editors) stumble over Jesus' parable just as assuredly as we do.

That is good news for us preachers. It relieves us of the responsibility of explaining what Jesus was trying to say. That is a scary proposition at the best of times. Can you imagine a sermon saying, "I think what Jesus was trying to say . . ." Yikes. If we are not explaining, what are we doing? We're listening. We are leaning in. We are examining our hearts.

So, what is he talking about? He is talking about money in the way he always talks about money—as though it were not nearly as important as we make it out to be. We have a problem with money. As one preacher was heard to say, "We print the words 'In God We Trust' right on the god we trust." We have a problem with money.

When Jesus talks about "dishonest wealth," what does he mean? Is this business a shady operation? Are they dealing with illegal products, or are they skipping out on taxes or permits or the like? Not at all. Dishonest wealth, or "unrighteous mammon" is the currency that empire uses to do business. It is the money in your wallet right now, the money in your offering plate each week. It is the coinage of a world that is passing, making way for a new way of living, a new age of being. Dishonest wealth is that which is beholden to the way things are in a broken and sinful world.

And Jesus says to use it well: use it for the kingdom of God; use it for the kingdom of heaven: use it for purposes it really isn't designed for; use it to build community and to value people. Use it to rescue people rather than to enslave them. Use it to lift folks up and not push them down. Use it to give away and not to hoard.

Those are the "laws" Jesus is telling us to break. You know, the laws of money: It is getting all you can, no matter who gets hurt. It is measuring your value by how much you have. It is always desiring for more. It is, "Those who have the money make the laws." Jesus says God has made the laws we are to live by, and they are to love God and love neighbor, even when it costs us something. He is not asking us to set up pyramid schemes or get-rich-quick schemes or to get into loan sharking. He is not asking us to engage in unscrupulous business practices to gain a following. He is saying, "Don't use money the way it is usually used."

Then, whether it is a gloss added later to mute the surprising message of this parable, or whether it is a part of Jesus' explication of the process of living in this world and working for the kingdom at the same time, Jesus says that it won't be easy, so take small steps. Learn to be faithful in the small things, the daily things, the quickly forgotten and passed-by things; and then the big things, the true riches—relationship and family and hope and joy and justice and peace—will be yours as well. Be faithful in the things that don't really belong to you—remember "give Caesar what is Caesar's"—then you will be faithful with what is your own. And what is your own? Your soul, your salvation, your connections, your passion for justice, and your ability to see the face of God in the other, that's what is yours. That's the currency of the kingdom.

## Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Gulf is Crossed

September 25, 2025 – [Luke 16:19-31](#)

Color: Green

### PLANNING NOTES

This week, we have a powerful story of reversal, the world turned upside-down. Or rather, right side up. This parable is what Mary sang about in the *Magnificat* way back at the beginning of Luke's Gospel. The poor are filled with good things, and the rich are sent away hungry; brought down the powerful and lifted up the lowly. Here it is acted out in the parable Jesus told to those who were ridiculing him because they loved money more than God's kingdom.

But is this a parable about the someday of heaven or the call for justice today? The only answer is yes! This is a both/and story. It is about what God has in store for all of creation. It is an Advent message here at the end of September—a teaser, perhaps, of that glorious season to come. This means we are looking to God's promised future, even as we work to make today look as much like that promise as we can.

Yet, while life after death is an element of the parable, this is not really a story of heaven. It is a call to holy living. It is an invitation to listen to the prophets and the law and to live as though the kingdom was already among us.

What gulfs do we see around us; what divides people in our communities? How might we speak into those gaps? Whom do we lift up in prayer as a way of acknowledging those marginalized? What doors do we need to open as a way of becoming more inclusive? How might we pray so that God can direct us to see the truth that surrounds us?

Today, we sing of the promise; we cling to the hope of the kingdom, the relationships of the kin-dom where we are truly one in the Spirit. We celebrate the hope of who we were created to be, even as we embrace what is within our reach and acknowledge what we need divine help to realize. Let our testimony be of crossing the gulfs that exist between us, of overcoming barriers and differences in order to be one body, one family. Maybe the worship team should ask the office to do a demographic study for the congregation to discover the level of homogeneity, but also to compare to the neighborhood surrounding the church building. What gaps do you see? What bridges have already been built and what gulfs still need to be crossed?

Worship is a model of life in the kin-dom of God. What the prophets described, what Mary sang, what the law defines, what Jesus lived before us, is the aim of our worship expression every time we gather. It is our joy to cross the gulf and, by the Spirit's guidance, build the kingdom.

## PREACHING NOTES

Even though the lectionary removed the context for this story, we can follow the flow. You might even sense Jesus' exasperation with those who willfully misunderstand what he has been proclaiming. Back up a few verses, it isn't a part of this text, but it might get you in the mood for preaching this story. Verse 16: "The law and the prophets were in effect until John came; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is proclaimed, and everyone tries to enter it by force." What in the world does that mean? Entering the kingdom by force?

What if it wasn't "by force," the way we usually understand it? It isn't strongarming one's way into the new age by brute strength or superior weaponry. What if, instead, Jesus was talking about those who think they deserve entrance? They thought they could get in through their status or wealth. They thought they were owed a place in God's kingdom.

Does there seem to be surprise on the part of the rich man who found himself in a place of punishment instead of the paradise he expected? He is, however, bold enough to shout across the gap and ask for mercy, "Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in the water to cool my tongue."

We don't have any indication of the tone of this request. He asks for mercy, true, but he still seems to see Lazarus as a means and not an end. Let him serve me. Send him to tend me. There has been some considerable debate about the demeanor of the rich man and of Lazarus from biblical scholars. Some point out that Lazarus was allowed to lay at the gate of the rich man, receiving crumbs. The idea that crumbs would fall from the rich man's table all the way out to the front gate seems unlikely. So whatever crumbs Lazarus was living on came to him through the largess of the rich man in the house. Lazarus wasn't chased away and perhaps was fed – not healed, but fed.

The question of whether the rich man was a good man or had a good heart isn't really addressed in this story. The problem is the gulf. The gulf in life was between the rich and the poor. Jesus, as Luke records the story, doesn't seem concerned with the condition of the heart as much as the disposition of wealth.

In an interesting departure from the usual, in this story, the only named character is Lazarus, the poor man. The rich man is anonymous. He could be anyone. He could be the one Jesus was accusing of loving money. He could be those who have when they are surrounded by those who have not. He could be identifying the gap that exists in this world and suggesting that gulfs continue to be a problem. That's why Abraham cannot "send Lazarus" to help the poor rich man now suffering. There is a gulf. And the gulf doesn't seem fixable in that life. This means that it can only be crossed or closed in this one. Jesus is calling all his listeners to pay attention to the gulfs that exist in our world. How do we close the gulfs between the haves and the have nots? How do we close the gulfs between those who hold power and those who live on the margins? How do we close the gulfs . . . or how do we cross them? Interesting word choice there, don't you think? It takes a cross to close the gulf that exists between people.

It is also interesting that the conversation in the story is not between God and the rich man, but between Father Abraham and the rich man. Is that significant? Is Jesus saying that we can't wait for a miracle to cross the gulf, but that it is within the power he has given us to make that change? We think too often of the power of the Spirit we have been given as an internal thing, an individual thing. Our salvation is about making sure that we are right with God. But what if we can't be right with God unless we are right with people too? What if our internal transformation happens in concert with an external transformation? What do we United Methodists like to say? That we are "making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." They are one in the same, markers on the same journey. What are we doing – we as individuals, of course, but we as a church more appropriately – to cross the gulfs that exist in our own communities, in our neighborhoods?

Did the rich man even see Lazarus? He saw him in the afterlife as a possible means of relief from his suffering; but did he see him there before laying at his gate? He was generous enough to not run Lazarus off, but did he really see him? Transformation begins with seeing. That's why we at Discipleship Ministries continue to say "See All the People" (<https://www.seeallthepeople.org/>). It is the beginning of accepting the power Jesus gave us to cross the gulf.