

Crossing The Great Divide

Luke 16:19-31

Wealth divides. That's the reality. No matter where you are. Wealth divides. That's *our* reality. It may not always be as obvious as it is in those photos, but it's true for us here in Adelaide just as much as it is true in Mumbai or Johannesburg or anywhere. Wealth divides.

I know I'm not telling you anything you don't already know . . . but I mention it just in case you hadn't noticed recently. Because sometimes it's easier not to notice. Sometimes it's easier to *choose* not to notice. Sometimes it's easier not to care. Like the rich man in the story didn't notice. Like the rich man in the story didn't care . . . about the great divide . . . the great divide between rich and poor.

And, I mention it now because wealth is relative, of course, and maybe you don't think that you're rich. And, in the end, this is not a story about rich and poor, this is a story about noticing or not noticing . . . this is a story about caring or not caring.

Jesus really plays it up with this story . . . he lays it on thick. You couldn't get two more opposite characters . . . caricatures really. The one is not just rich, he is ridiculously rich. He covers himself in purple and fine linen. In ancient times purple was the most expensive cloth you could have because the purple dye was extracted drop by drop from tiny shell-fish. And, this man doesn't just eat, he *feasts* . . . every single day!

Well, back in those days the rabbis taught that being rich was a sign of God's blessing . . . but they also taught, as was said in the Old Testament, that God blessed the rich so they could notice the poor . . . so they could care for the poor . . . so they could help the poor.

Like the man sitting by his gate . . . every day. Like the rich man, this man is described in terms of clothing and food too. This man is clothed in sores. This man never has enough to eat. He's perpetually hungry.

So, there they are . . . two characters . . . two opposites . . . in every way . . . a great chasm between them even though they're not far apart. Day after day, the rich man goes out his gate . . . and he doesn't notice . . . or, he doesn't choose to notice . . . or, he doesn't *want* to notice the poor man at his doorstep.

But, there's one more difference between them . . . and I'm sure you recognized it. The one man has everything he could ever desire . . . more than everything . . . he's crazy rich . . . he's got the good life . . . he's probably respected and honoured in his community, but Jesus doesn't give him a name. In this story . . . this story that has been told generation after generation for 2000 years now, the rich man is a nobody. He's nameless. He has no identity. Did you notice that?

But the poor man . . . the poor man who has nothing . . . absolutely nothing . . . he is *somebody* . . . Jesus knows *his* name . . . he has an identity: Lazarus. Did you notice that?

I did say, didn't I, that this is a story about noticing or not noticing?

Two men . . . complete opposites . . . one rich, one poor . . . a great chasm between them . . . a great chasm because the nameless rich man doesn't notice . . . the nameless rich man doesn't care. And, then comes the great leveler . . . they both die. Death is no respecter of wealth . . . or status . . . or reputation . . . or stuff. They both die. And the chasm that existed in life is now fixed . . . except their situations have been reversed . . . the rich man is in torment in Hades . . . in hell, while Lazarus is carried by the angels to the *bosom* of Abraham . . . that's how the old translations put it . . . in the bosom of Abraham . . . it captures so much better the intimacy of what's happened for Lazarus.

And, now, I know you have a million questions about heaven and hell, but remember this is a story . . . a parable . . . it's not a doctrinal statement . . . it's not a theological treatise . . . it's a parable . . . and when Jesus tells parables he is usually telling us something about the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is a kingdom where things are reversed . . . where the first are last and the last are first . . . as we see in this story.

But, if you insist on knowing why the rich man is in hell . . . it's not because he is rich . . . it's because he doesn't notice! He doesn't notice the great chasm . . . he doesn't choose to notice the great chasm between him and his neighbour in need. And, he doesn't notice the great chasm between him and God!

Even there in hell he doesn't get it . . . still thinking of himself . . . asking Abraham to send Lazarus to bring him some water . . . as if Lazarus was there to serve him! Asking Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers . . . as if the poor are there to serve the rich!

And, did you notice Abraham's reply? It's no good . . . they already have everything they need . . . if they would just notice . . . they already have Moses and the prophets . . . they already have God's word . . . if they won't listen to that the great chasm is already fixed.

And, there is the heart of the nameless rich man's problem. He didn't notice the word of God . . . he didn't care for Moses and the prophets . . . God's word that makes it clear that God blesses us with so much . . . even material riches . . . not that we can just notice ourselves . . . not so we can just care about ourselves . . . but so that we can care about our neighbour . . . and our neighbour is always those around us in need.

The rich man's neighbour was Lazarus. By ignoring Lazarus the rich man ignored God. So, in the end the rich man's problem was unbelief . . . he believed in himself . . . he believed in his own welfare . . . he believed in his own comfort, not in the word of God. And, if you wanted this to be a cautionary tale, then perhaps that's it . . . that's what wealth can do.

But, there is one more thing I wonder if you noticed. Did you notice who *you* are in this parable?

That's a rhetorical question, because I am going to answer it for you. I'm going to tell you who you are in this story.

You are someone God knows by name. God notices you. God cares about you. God noticed the great divide between him and you. So, God sent his Son Jesus . . . God's Word in the flesh . . . God sent Jesus to cross the great divide . . . literally . . . for your sake. God in the flesh came to serve you . . . with care, with love, with grace.

You are someone God knows by name.

And, I know I'm not telling you anything you don't already know . . . but I mention it just in case you hadn't noticed recently.

Amen.

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