

Before the chasm is fixed
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
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A week ago, late Saturday night, I was sitting with groups of astute and thoughtful teenagers listening to their questions about faith. I say listening, because while I was ostensibly there to *answer* their questions, very often I looked them in the eye and said things like, "That's in the realm of mystery," or just plain, old "I don't know." Thankfully, there were questions I could answer like who marriage is for, answer: everyone; and what's my favorite flavor of ice cream, answer: cookies and cream. I was grateful I could answer a few queries because I don't like saying, "I don't know." My family will tell you that I can bluff a pretty good answer to a question to avoid admitting the limits of my knowledge. But when someone asks me, "what happens after we die?" I am sure that this is a question I should not bluster on. I don't know. I have hopes, but my brain is this big and my experiences are entirely limited to this side of life.

So, I get to the second half of chapter sixteen in Luke, and I have to sit very quietly, letting the images and words stare back at me. And I have a lot more questions than answers, which New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine says is how parables are supposed to work, so that's good - even if it makes me uncomfortable. Jesus is telling us a story, and it's about a lot of things: wealth and power in this world, poverty and desperation in this world, comfort in what comes next, torment in what comes next, flames and cool water, warnings and heeding those warnings, prophets and resurrection. It's about worlds Jesus and his listeners can see, and worlds they cannot see, worlds that they can only imagine. It's about worlds we can still see today and those we can only wonder about.

And maybe the story does describe the way things will be, and maybe not. I'll tell you, I balk at eternal torment of any kind for anyone. As much as there are people who make this world a little or a lot more broken, my *schadenfreude* at their despair or torture is not a good look for me. And more significantly, eternal torture and punishment for anyone - even the worst of us - is not a good look for a God of mercy, redemption, and love. Blessedly for me, that's not a lane I belong in any way, because as I mentioned my brain *and my heart* are only so big, and my experiences are entirely limited to this cracked-up, beautiful, fleeting side of life.

That leaves me with one image to sit with just a bit longer: the chasm. Since I don't know for sure about untraversable chasms in the next realms, all I can helpfully do is think about chasms in this realm. This, after all, is the content of the given messengers, Moses and the prophets, and the would-be messenger, Lazarus. Here, I think, is a pretty good paraphrase of what those messenger do say or could say, "Take a good hard look at the chasms, and instead of imagining their fixed nature in some next world, imagine some ways across in this world." The this-world chasm in the story is actually not a gorge but a gate; it wouldn't have been all that hard for the rich man to open it just enough to pass some leftovers through, but it seems he didn't even register the existence of Lazarus. He didn't see, or chose not to see, the gap and the human just on the other side.

Some chasms are just gates with a simple latch to be lifted; some are genuine abysses, canyons, and ravines that will require more imagination and more gear to get across. Some are physical: actual train tracks or interstates that put some people on the “wrong side” and leave them stranded without resources or support; oceans that allow the myth of insulation to soothe us; fences that keep that annoying neighbor at bay but not the sound of their leaf-blower. Some ruptures and rifts are intangible: unresolved and unforgiven hurts that fester just as much as Lazarus’ sores; fears of difference that lie between us and lie to us that keep us from recognizing the human inside the “monster” label; fatigue and despair and overwhelm whispering to us that nothing really matters and we might as well not try. Tangible or intangible, these spaces are real. And Moses and the prophets and Jesus the story-teller are asking us to take a look at chasms in our present lives.

In England, in the tube or subway stations, the announcers routinely remind travelers to “mind the gap,” to pay close attention to the space between the platform and the train. We have to see the spaces in our lives that separate and divide us, and if we want to go anywhere we have to be willing to step across. When the steps are small, or the gates are unlocked and easy to open, this isn’t all that hard a message to mind. But sometimes it seems like the breach is impassable. We can start to heed the voices that say “it’s too late,” it’s too late to do anything about climate change, it’s too late to say I’m sorry, or “it’s too hard,” it’s too hard feed all these people, it’s impossible to right the inequities of centuries of oppression, it’s too hard to sit down and listen to my grief or their pain.

Like I said earlier, I struggle with the idea that the chasm is permanently fixed in the unknowable next chapters, but I know for a fact that the chasms are not fixed here. Whether or not it was too late for the rich man after his death, this story tells us that it’s not too late for the five living brothers and that it’s not impossible for us. What’s hard about that message is that it’s hard; it’s hard to do the work of climbing down the side of the canyon, across the depths, and back up the other side - especially when we don’t know what things are going to be like over there. But parables are not really supposed to pat us on the back and tell us we are fine inside our gates. They are intended to provoke and to challenge, and to leave us with questions like how do we get across this chasm?

Our story-telling God doesn’t give us turn-by-turn GPS directions guiding us efficiently through the wilderness or precisely measured blueprints for how to construct the bridges over, but perhaps we do have some compass points that will guide us through the wilds and deeps: hope and love. Hope whispering that while we live, we have time. Hope telling us it’s not too late, and even small steps get us somewhere. And love, suggesting that we are strong enough to do the hard thing and that love will empower us. The poet Rumi, another wisdom teacher from our sister faith Islam, says, “Love is the bridge between you and everything.” Love is the bridge between you and me, between rich and poor, between hurt and healed. Love traverses languages and histories and geographies. And it’s never too late for love, nothing is so fixed and gaping that love cannot reach out and over.

There’s a lot I don’t know. And I don’t even know exactly what to do next when I stand at the edge of a deep fissure, but I do believe that God is on both sides of every chasm and is present on the path through. And while I don’t know where hope and love will lead me exactly, nor you in your journey, I do believe that we are still invited across the chasm.