



“The Wide Chasm”

Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Scripture: Luke 16:19-31

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A few years ago I participated in my first duathlon. This event is for those of us who sink when we enter the water. It entails only running and cycling; no swimming. Our daughter, Grandison, talked me into it. She said it would be fun and something we could do together. When she handed me the registration form, I thought: great idea. But when the day arrived, and we pulled into the grassy field where all the participants were parking, I became anxious.

As I got out of the car, I looked around to size up the competition and it was apparent that everyone else had come directly from the U.S. Olympic Training Center. They were young, slender and in peak physical condition. I asked myself what this balding, middle-aged man was doing in the midst of these svelte athletes.

Grandison and I unloaded our bikes and took them to the transition area. This serves as a waiting area for your bike, helmet and sports drink. As you finish running the first 5K, you dash into the transition area to put on your helmet, grab a swig of Gatorade and take off cycling.

However, as I was putting my bike on the rack, I gazed around at the other bikes. They did not look like my bike. They were racing bikes; high tech. They looked like something Lance Armstrong rides in the Tour de France. My bike does not look like this. My bike looks like something a balding, middle-aged man rides through your neighborhood.

What was I doing there? And then a thought came to me. It was brilliant. If I grimace, grab my chest and fall to the ground, I might be able to get out of this! But, I realized Grandison would never let me get away with such a cheap trick, so I was stuck.

When we reached the starting line, my outlook improved. Other people had shown up who did not look like seasoned triathletes. I discovered that I was not the oldest, nor the heaviest, and I was not the only one without a high tech racing bike. To my delight, there were people of all ages, shapes and sizes, and I realized that I probably would not come in dead last, so I was happy.

Later, reflecting on that race, I realized that it was in some ways a microcosm of life. While we like to believe that everyone in the race has an equal chance of winning, we know that's not true. It might be true if everyone in the race were the same age and had the same body shape and owned the same equipment, but that is never the case. Some have advantages that others do not. And in the race of life, some people have so many strikes against them that I wonder how they even keep going.

Millions are born into poverty and never climb out of it. Some people are told every day of

their lives, “You will never amount to anything,” and they never do. Others are victims of abuse, some must attend pitiful schools, and some battle mental illness.

Many successful people have a hard time admitting that others face huge disadvantages. They simply think of these people as lazy. Some even imply that the misfortune these people experience is no accident. They get what they deserve.

That was the conventional wisdom when Jesus lived. For centuries, people thought that wealth was a blessing of God, and misfortune was a punishment. We read in the 28th chapter of Deuteronomy: “If you will obey the Lord...you will abound in prosperity...but if you disobey the Lord...curses will come upon you.” Verses such as these were used by the successful to justify their privileges, while at the same time keeping the poor and afflicted on the bottom rungs of the ladder.

The well-to-do loved this theology of health and wealth. It allowed them to relish their abundance by indulging themselves. It gave them permission to stroll past the beggars without triggering a guilty conscience. “After all,” as Barbara Brown Taylor says, “who were they to interfere with what God had arranged for these poor souls? The best thing was to leave well enough alone. Let the poor pick themselves up and dust themselves off. Let them try harder, and God might smile upon them too.”¹

Numerous other passages contradicted such self-serving beliefs, but the wealthy had conveniently overlooked them. The Old Testament prophets in particular pointed out that God was not punishing the poor, but instead was deeply concerned about their plight. They said that God is a God of justice and wants those who have the means to care for those in need.

Jesus sang from the same hymnal as the prophets. He told stories about the foolishness of trusting wealth, and the danger of ignoring the poor. Today’s parable from the Gospel of Luke is a prime example and a precursor to Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Jesus tells of a rich man who wears expensive clothes and feasts on sumptuous meals. At his doorstep there is a man named Lazarus, who is poor, hungry and afflicted with sores. Both men die, but they do not end up in the same place. Lazarus ends up with Abraham in a place of great comfort. The rich man ends up in a place of torment, separated by a wide chasm. The rich man begs Abraham to send Lazarus to him to bring him a cool drink, but Abraham says that’s impossible. The chasm is too wide. The rich man then begs Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers not to make the same mistake. But Abraham replies that they have already had ample warnings in the teachings of Moses and the prophets. And that is the end of the story.

It is not an appealing story, and it may leave us wondering if we are substantially different than the rich man. How much do we do to alleviate the suffering of the poor?

Jesus tells this story not to leave us wallowing in our guilt, but to teach us a truth that can transform our lives. We are the brothers and sisters of the rich man. There is still time for us to awake from our stupor and to respond with compassion and generosity.

A colleague shares one of the most revealing letters ever written to “Dear Abby.” It was written by a young woman who wrote: ‘Dear Abby, I think my boyfriend ought to pay for half the cost of my birth control pills, but I don’t know him well enough to talk about money.’ It’s a revealing comment isn’t it?’²

In 21st century North America, people are willing to talk, email, blog, text, twitter and even download a video of themselves on YouTube about practically any subject you can name, but we’re hesitant to talk to one another about how we handle our money. Yet, if we study the gospels and grapple with the teachings of Jesus, we cannot avoid it. It’s one of the most common topics Jesus addresses because he knows that the way we handle our money reveals more about the depth of our spiritual lives than practically anything else.

The way we handle our wealth is vital to our families and to our retirement. However, we must never forget that the way we handle our wealth is also vital to the health of our souls.

Today's passage, in which Jesus illustrates the wide chasm between the wealthy and the poor, makes it clear that God is focused on how we handle our wealth. God challenges us to wrestle with how we spend, save and invest our money, because the way we spend, save and invest reveal how compassionate and generous we are. Compassion and generosity are two key indicators of the depth of a person's spiritual life.

Some think their level of spiritual maturity is determined by whether or not they take the Bible literally. Others think the litmus test for faith is measured by the degree to which they believe in supernatural miracles. However, a person's spiritual life is most evident, not in what they say they believe, but in how generously they live their lives.

In his letter to the church in Galatia, Paul made it easy to determine the depth of our spiritual lives. He did not make a list of beliefs we had to affirm. Instead, he spelled out the traits of a person who lives in harmony with God's Spirit. (Galatians 5:22) Three of the nine distinguishing characteristics are love, generosity and self-control. And surely it takes love, in the form of compassion and self-control, in order to become generous. If you focus only on yourself, you will not be generous. And if you have no self-control, you can be easily persuaded to use your wealth only for yourself and your loved ones. Compassion for others and the determination to improve the lives of others generates generosity.

When we want to hold onto our wealth, when we feel that we must clutch our possessions and our money, is it because we are at our core greedy? I'm not sure. It may be that at our deepest level we are afraid, and our fear reveals itself in terms of greed. We are afraid of losing everything and becoming unable to care for ourselves and our family. We may also be afraid of taking the risk to live in ways we have never lived before. It may disrupt some of our friendships if our core values change to the extent that gaining wealth, displaying wealth and talking about wealth are superseded by a spirit of generosity and concern for the poor.

These days if you talk much about your concern for the have-nots, if you suggest that everyone should be entitled to a decent standard of living and everyone should be entitled to health care, some people will call you a socialist. But keep in mind that Jesus will call you "One of my faithful followers."

Our congregation provides numerous opportunities to care for the poor both in this country and abroad. The Mission Fair in Community Hall explains many of the ways we touch the lives of those who have no address to call home or need a place to get a meal or find themselves out of a job.

In the next few days you will receive a letter from Westminster urging you to make a generous pledge for the coming year. Don't toss it in with the recycling and don't push it aside for later. This is your opportunity to demonstrate that you care about this church, you care about people who need help and you care about your own spiritual life.

Novelist, Isabel Allende, was interviewed for National Public Radio's This I Believe project. Here's what she said: "I have lived with passion and in a hurry, trying to accomplish too many things. I never had time to think about my beliefs until my 28-year-old daughter Paula fell ill. She was in a coma for a year and I took care of her at home, until she died in my arms.

"During that year of agony and the following year of my grieving, everything stopped for me. There was nothing to do — just cry and remember. However, that year also gave me an opportunity to reflect on my journey and the principles that hold me together...

"Paralyzed and silent in her bed, my daughter Paula taught me a lesson that is now my mantra: You only have what you give. It's by spending yourself that you become rich.

“The pain of losing my child was a cleansing experience. I had to throw overboard all excess baggage and keep only what is essential. Because of Paula, I don’t cling to anything anymore. Now I like to give much more than to receive. I am happier when I love than when I am loved.”

And she concludes with these words: “Give, give, give — what is the point of having experience, knowledge or talent if I don’t give it away? Of having stories if I don’t tell them to others? Of having wealth if I don’t share it?”³

I pray you will make a pledge that shows you are compassionate and generous. The health of our church family and the health of your soul depend on it.

NOTES

1. Barbara Brown Taylor, *Bread of Angels*, (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1997), p.111.
2. Tom Long, “Investment Strategies for Unrighteous Mammon: Preaching about Money from the Gospel of Luke” at the Festival of Homiletics in Atlanta, May 2009.
3. Isabel Allende, as heard on NPR’s All Things Considered, April 4, 2005. The text of her is found at thisIbelieve.org