

Luke 16:19-31
Creekside COB
September 26, 2004

“The Gulf Between Us”

Truman Burbank's life was fake, but he didn't know it. He was an ordinary, average guy with an ordinary, average job as a desk clerk at an insurance company. He lived in a quaint, Norman Rockwell-like town. He had a lovely wife, friendly neighbors, and fine co-workers. Truman thought he was leading a normal life. Everything about the town, and everyone with whom he related was so nice and happy and... fake.

Truman didn't know that his entire life was a television show. The town wasn't a town at all, but a gigantic studio. From birth on, Truman's life was broadcast worldwide. Twenty-four hours a day, millions tuned into "The Truman Show" to see what he was up to.

As time went by, he grew dissatisfied with his life, but couldn't figure out why. He wanted to travel, but there was always something preventing him from leaving town. Truman Burbank discovered that the world he thought was real was a fabrication. The always-cheerful people, his co-workers, and even his wife were all actors! People who lived beyond the imaginary world of the studio didn't lead the happy, successful, perfect lives Truman thought everyone lived.

The parable of the rich man and the beggar is such a story. A man lived in the lap of luxury, isolated and insulated from the suffering outside the walls of his estate. The parable is a kind of biblical literature called, "parables of reversal" in which the winners and losers trade places at the conclusion of the story. The song that Mary sang after the angel Gabriel revealed that she would give birth to the Messiah, contained a warning of reversals to come:

He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. Luke 1: 51-53

In Luke, Jesus cleared a path leading to the rich man and Lazarus. Along the path he warned people to beware of the power of money. He told a parable about a foolish farmer who thought he was sitting pretty after building new silos to store his record harvest, but soon as the job was done, he dropped dead. A few weeks ago we heard Jesus unload on the rich who threw lavish banquets for the haves but didn't include the have-nots. Jesus told a parable about a playboy prodigal son who spent the last cent of his inheritance trying to find the good life with wine, women, and song. Earlier in Luke 16, Jesus said, "You can't serve God and money." When the Pharisees heard it, they rolled their eyes, and Jesus called them a, "money-obsessed" bunch.

The parable before us is the only one in which Jesus gave a character a name. It's an ironic name, given the poor man's condition. Lazarus meant, "God has helped." Judging from appearances, God hadn't helped Lazarus much. Jesus didn't give the wealthy man a name. Knowing he was loaded was enough.

Several years ago we took the kids to the Grand Canyon. After a couple days gazing at the big hole, we went to another canyon east of the park. It was on a much smaller scale, but no less awesome. The walls of the gorge had a sheer vertical drop of nearly a thousand feet. The kids ran ahead of us to the rim. When we arrived we didn't see them until Adam hollered, "Hey! Over here!" My heart jumped into my mouth. There the three of them sat on the canyon rim with their legs dangling over the edge. There were no guardrails or protective barriers-- just warning signs. My son couldn't see why I freaked out when he and Adam ran toward the rim like they couldn't stop.

A few months later I heard that a French tightrope walker was going to attempt crossing the canyon with no safety harness. I

got the creeps thinking about it. Apparently he did, too, because the attempt never happened.

As I reflected on our text, this canyon came to mind. On one side was Mr. Rich, adorned in Neiman Marcus fashions. He had his own French chef who fed him like a king three meals a day. The Message, says, "... the man wasted his days in conspicuous consumption." On the other side was Lazarus. You could hardly paint a more pathetic picture of a person. He had nothing to his name. He dreamed about eating Mr. Rich's table scraps. His ragged clothes were disintegrating on his body. It made people sick look at Lazarus. He was covered with sores from head to foot, and so weak and devoid of dignity that he no longer tried to push away the street dogs that licked his sores.

The gulf between them was great. But there was one thing they had in common -- death. Mr. Rich had an elaborate funeral. He gave the best preacher in town a wad of bills to deliver a moving tribute to his life. The church was packed with people on the Who's Who list. Lazarus didn't have a funeral. For all we know he died on the street and was eaten by the dogs.

Next the scene shifts to the afterlife. They were still separated by a chasm, but their fortunes have reversed. Lazarus' name-"God has helped", now fits. He sits in the lap of Abraham. He is enjoying all he had been denied in his sorry life and is given much more. But Mr. Rich, who sat in the lap of luxury all his life found himself languishing in flames. He still held on to the assumption that his needs were most important, and that the task of others was to wait on him. He cried across the gulf to Abraham, "Tell Lazarus to fetch me some cool water and put it on my scorched tongue." In the Cotton Patch Version of the Gospels, the answer he got was, "Lazarus ain't gonna run no mo yo errans, rich man."

This parable assuils our assumptions. St. Francis once said, "Your understandings are misunderstandings." We understand the way the world is structured is "just the way it is." Some things will never change. We understand that life is governed by the survival of the fittest. We understand that ultimately, every

one must be responsible for themselves. The rich are rich because they worked hard and earned it. The poor still haven't learned this lesson. It's unfortunate, but when the game ends, there must be winners and losers. The law of life can't be amended. As the saying goes, "Them that has, gits." We understand that our first priority is protecting ourselves and preserving our way of life. It's called reality.

Mr. Rich wasn't apologetic about his wealth or how he got it. His only regret was that he was in hell. He still thinks he can give orders. Abraham told him, "Lazarus couldn't get you a drink if he wanted to. There's no bridge across the gulf between Lazarus and you." "All right then, tell Lazarus to go warn my brothers to they won't end up here, too." "Sorry," Abraham said. "They have all the information they need from Moses and the prophets." "But they'll listen to someone who's come back from the dead." "Sorry again," Abraham said. "If Moses can't change them, neither will someone who crawled out of the grave."

Some of you may be old enough to remember one of the most "colorful" mayors of New York City, Fiorella La Guardia. One bitter cold winter night, Mayor La Guardia found himself presiding over Police Court when a disheveled old man was brought before the bench for stealing a loaf of bread. He tried to explain to La Guardia that his family was starving. You could have heard a pin drop in the courtroom.

La Guardia said, "The law makes no exceptions. I've got to punish you. I sentence you to a fine of ten dollars." As he spoke, the mayor was reaching beneath his seat, and came up with his famous hat and sat in on the bench for everyone to see. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a ten-dollar bill. "This is for your fine, and now I remit the fine." But his kindness didn't stop there. He looked at everyone in the courtroom and said, "Furthermore, I'm going to fine everyone in this room fifty cents for living in a town where a man has to steal bread in order to eat. Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines and give them to this defendant." In a few moments, the teary-eyed old man left the courtroom with forty-seven dollars and fifty cents.

Mayor La Guardia decided not to be confined by the limits of the law. He appealed to reality that was more in harmony with God's kingdom than an earthly kingdom. Jesus' parable is designed to push us out of our happy and comfortable world and start to see the people who will never be part of it. The economy is growing stronger. We're creating good jobs. We're cutting taxes so that more people than ever before can realize the American dream. And the Census Bureau reports that the percentage of Americans living in poverty has increased and there are forty-five million Americans without health insurance.

Barbara Taylor says the thing we should fear most about this parable is that God will give us exactly what we want. If we choose not to see Lazarus outside our gate, we won't. If we chose not to see the people who are left behind because of "the way things are," we won't. If we choose to mind our own store and pretend not to see the things that God wants to give us, we won't. If Mr. Rich knew ahead of time the end he was choosing for himself, do you think he would have done something for Lazarus?

Will WE listen to Moses, the prophets, and Jesus and see life and all with whom we live it in a new way? In a short story called, "Gooseberries," the main character says: "There ought to be a man with a hammer behind the door of every happy man, to remind him by his constant knocks that there are unhappy people, and that happy as he himself may be, life will sooner or later show him its cause, catastrophe will overtake him-sickness, poverty, loss-and nobody will see it, just as he now neither sees nor hears the misfortunes of others. But the happy man goes on living in the petty vicissitudes of life that touch him lightly, like the wind in an aspen tree, and all is well."

We are Christian enough to know that the world we've made and the one God one day will have are very different. We aren't asked to end world hunger or eradicate poverty in our lifetime. Jesus said we would always have the poor with us. But we are asked to respond.

Robert Fulghum wrote what he calls, Fulghum's Recommendations which fit someplace in between the Ten Commandments and Murphy's Law. They are:

- 1. Buy lemonade from any kid who is selling.**
- 2. Anytime you can vote on anything, vote.**
- 3. Attend the twenty-fifth reunion of your high school class**
- 4. Choose having time over having money.**
- 5. Always take the scenic route.**
- 6. Always be someone's valentine**
- 7. When the circus comes to town, be there.**
- 8. Give money to all street musicians**
- 9. Give at least something to any beggar who asks.**

His recommendations may not seem like much, but they're not a bad start. Last night, members of the New Life Class served supper at the Faith Mission. It didn't seem like much. Just some food on a plate, a smile, and a warm greeting. But the next time the servers eat a good meal in their warm, lovely homes, they may not be able to do it without thinking about the hungry men, women, and children who live just outside the neighborhood.

Years ago, a Twentieth Century Fox film executive in Paris arranged an exhibit of fake paintings that were used in the movie, "How to Steal a Million." He called the New York office to have the "fakes" sent to Paris. The problem was, they were on tour somewhere else. The executive was frantic. "The Paris show is set to go. What am I supposed to do?" The New York office told him to get the original paintings that were worth millions for the fake exhibit. "No one will ever know the difference," he was told.

Christians aren't necessarily better people. We're just better informed. We see what the rest of the world chooses not to see. We, of all people know that when God finally has God's way with the world, things will be reversed, undone, and de-constructed. We know we should respond. We stand a better chance of learning our lesson than did the brothers of Mr. Rich. Abraham said they wouldn't be convinced by someone who returned from the dead. He was wrong. Someone did come back from the

dead-not to scold or threaten, but to help us tell the difference between life that is fake and real, and lend a hand to those in need.