

Crossing the Chasms

I sent an email message to my friend and colleague, Cynthia Davis of the Greater Faith Christian Church this last week. With her permission, I want to share with you, parts of our conversation. My message said, “In light of the most recent shootings of the black men in Charlotte and Tulsa, is there any event – a vigil or a rally or some sort of response that I could help organize that would call for an end to this killing?” I didn’t hear back from her until the next day, which is unusual. She called me first thing the next morning and her voice started out calm and measured. “Good morning, Lois. I thank you for your thoughtful message.”

“You’re welcome!”, I replied. “Cynthia – what can we do?” There was a pause.

“Lois, I am just raw. I am so tired.”

She went on to tell me, with increasing volume and strain in her voice, that she lives with constant fear for her boys. Her “boys” – one in college and the other in graduate school, are no longer “boys”. Yet she fears for them constantly. Every time a black man is murdered she frantically calls them to make sure they’re all right. And then she goes through her spiel again – what to do when you get stopped by the police. What NOT to do. What to say. What NOT to say. Be calm. Do whatever they tell you. Keep your hands visible at all times. Call me the second you get home.

“You know I am a woman of prayer, Lois, but I am so tired of attending prayer vigils and rallies and at the end of the day nothing changes. I still spend unmeasurable amounts of energy worrying that something will happen to my boys. And they are NOT thugs or drug dealers. They are well-heeled, well-educated, handsome, talented African-American young men. Why? Why do I have to continually worry about them? Nothing that you and I could plan or organize can change that! And besides, people are angry. I’m angry! What if we plan something and people come and we can’t control their anger – what if someone gets hurt?”

In so many words, what my friend said to me was, “...between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.”

I’m learning. I’m learning to know her. To see her. To understand her life and her pain, this aspect of her reality that is quite different than mine. The place where the analogy breaks down is that unlike Lazarus and the rich man, Cynthia and I have much in common – we are much more equals than the characters in our story today. She is also learning to know me, to know what makes me tick – and what ticks me off! What makes me hurt and brings me joy. We are becoming friends. But now, back to our story.

The problem for the rich man was not necessarily that he was rich. His problem was that his riches kept him from being able to see the chasm. He couldn’t SEE Lazarus as a human being. All throughout their lives the rich man (who, by the way, does NOT have a name in the story) stepped over and around and past Lazarus hundreds of times. The problem was not that the rich man didn’t know Lazarus’ name. No, that was precisely the problem! He KNEW Lazarus’ name – and STILL could not perceive his humanity. Then, after they both died, and the rich man was in the agony of Hades, even then, he persisted in his narrow, privileged perception that

Lazarus' role was still, somehow, to serve him. To fetch him water, to be his messenger, to act at his bidding.

And Father Abraham, lovingly and gently tells the rich man how it is. "Child. Child, you missed it. You spent your while life chasing things that don't matter. Looking through a lens of privilege and power and working so hard to support the system that kept everyone in their place. You forgot to look, to really SEE my Lazarus. You were never mean to him – you just never bothered to be kind to him. You didn't hurt him. You just didn't take the time to help him. And your compulsive distraction with "being rich" created a chasm between you that simply could not be crossed."

"Well, then," pleads the rich man, "if it's too late for me, send a message to my brothers so they don't have to go through this terrible agony." "They've already been given the law and the prophets who tried to teach them how God wants them to live – if they didn't listen to them, they're not going to listen to a poor nobody who rises from the dead."

One commentator I read wrote, "I am convinced that the unrepentant but chastened rich man is not truly the subject of this parable at all. We are. We are those who... know the resurrected Jesus. We are the ones who have the law and the prophets and have seen God's compassion embodied in the life and ministry of Jesus. We are the ones who gather each week to celebrate his victory over death, forgiveness of sin, and the possibility of living in the light of God's grace, mercy and abundance. We are those who follow the crucified and Risen Jesus."

So this is the good news, folks! We have the law and the prophets – AND the life and ministry of Jesus to help us see and identify the chasms, to see and *know* the Lazarus', to work to dismantle the systems that create them and to let Jesus shape how we live every day, right now, on this earth.

Luke is not so much interested in where we are in the afterlife – that's up to God. "Luke knows that we simply cannot live into the abundant life God offers us here and now alone. Abundant life comes... when we see those around us as gifts of God and experience the blessing of sharing what we have with others. There's a reason generous people are happier than stingy ones – God created us to be in relationship with those around us and we experience the fullness of the life God intends and offers only when we embrace the people God has set in our path. This parable isn't about earning or relinquishing an eternal reward; it's about the character and quality of our life right now. One might even argue that for Luke eternal life isn't a distant reality at all but (it's something that) starts now, each time we embrace... those around us. So while it is certainly a warning not to overlook those around us (who are) in need, it is also an invitation to live into fuller, more meaningful, and more joyous life by sharing ourselves – our time, talents, and certainly our wealth. Because as we do, we live into the life and kingdom God outlines in the law of Moses, clarifies in the prophets and makes manifest and available to all in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus."

There ARE chasms – distances of race, of culture, of religion, distance of misunderstanding and judgment, of distance caused by our own particular paradigms, distances between people that seem insurmountable. And there are rich people and people like Lazarus'. People who seem

very different than we are and who it's very difficult for us to see. But Jesus has shown us over and over again how to look with eyes of love, how to see with hearts of compassion, how to live and die and be resurrected by the power of the Holy. Jesus has shown us how to change the world and bring for the kingdom.

Go forth in the joy of that reality.

Sources:

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