

**Proximity Project**  
**Luke 16: 19-31**  
**Leah Hrachovec**

In 1867, American writer and humorist Mark Twain boarded the *USS Quaker City*, a former war ship built only several miles from here in Philadelphia. On this ship, one retired after the Civil War, Twain and a number of travelers took a 20,000-mile roundtrip voyage across the Atlantic to tour parts of Europe and the Holy Land. Two years later, Twain published the book *The Innocents Abroad*, a reflection on their journey, which includes this now-famous thought: "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime."

Some people travel for learning, adventure, and to increase a sense of connection with global neighbors. Others travel because they have to. In a lesser-known part of the Christmas story, from another gospel writer Matthew, we learn that the infant Jesus and his parents started life as a family with an unplanned trek to Egypt, not for fun, not for family visits, but because they were asylum seekers, running from a king who sought to end this young Messiah's life. What does all this have to do with the parable at hand? Well, this parable that Jesus tells, found only in the gospel of Luke, bears striking resemblance to a similar story found in ancient Egyptian writings.

It is possible that some of Jesus' stories came from His years of displacement in a foreign land, learning from others who did not share His or His parents' culture or religion, and these stories and interactions shaped His imagination, giving His ministry a richness that comes a life familiar with several cultures, languages, and traditions.

This parable before us today, about the Rich Man and Lazarus is also unique in that no other parable of Jesus contains proper names. Only this one. Notice that there are three main characters, but only two have names. Abraham and Lazarus. Curiously, the rich man's name is never given, nor the names of his five brothers at home. And our Lazarus today is not the Lazarus that Jesus would later raise from the dead, but it doesn't mean there is not a connection, some reason why Jesus chose the name of his friend. For Lazarus means, "God helps."

In life, God does not seem to help this Lazarus, if that is the way we think God works. The rich man in this story, though, appears to have everything and more. Jesus describes these two men in terms of their contrasting lives. The rich man wears purple and fine linen (Jesus specifies it was Egyptian cotton), while Lazarus is covered with sores, with no clothes that keep him from being licked by stray dogs. The rich man dines sumptuously, while Lazarus starves, longing for just the crumbs from the rich

man's table. The rich man dies and is buried, while the poor man Lazarus, dies and is carried away by angels to be with Abraham.

Earlier in chapter 16, Luke reminds us just who was first listening to this parable. Yes, the disciples are there, but they have been joined by a group, the Pharisees and the scribes, disturbed that Jesus is eating and socializing with the wrong crowd, with those who are sinners and tax collectors. Disturbed that Jesus is critiquing their relationship with money while sitting with these dubious characters. And this is not the first part of the conversation. Jesus has already told another parable on how to relate to money, one we explored in worship last week, concluding that parable about the shrewd manager with, "You can't serve both God and wealth."

Continuing the contrasts between the rich man and the poor man Lazarus, Jesus paints pictures of the two after death. The poor man now rests in the arms of Abraham, lovingly comforted by this great father in faith. The rich man, though, finds himself in Hades, tormented constantly.

Jesus doesn't stop His story here, with Lazarus being rescued and brought to Abraham, with the rich man suffering, this reversal of fortune. Like a graphic novel, somehow these worlds are within shouting distance, and the rich man, who has no name, calls up to Abraham. Not with repentance, not with an apology, not with sorrow, but with a command to convey. A command for Lazarus. A command He doesn't even direct to Lazarus, but to father Abraham. To the rich man, Lazarus is still hardly a man, someone to be ignored, and if not ignored, then to be given an order. It turns out the rich man does know Lazarus. He asks for him by name, but he does not speak to him, he does not see him as anyone else but someone who might be used for his own purposes. There is no change in the rich man.

Before Abraham even points it out, there is still a chasm, a gap, a divide, between these two men. Abraham does not gloat over this chasm, but seems to lament it. While still cradling his child Lazarus, Abraham calls this rich man, "child" too, speaking to him gently and truthfully. The chasm is fixed. There is nothing to be done.

If we are honest, we know this chasm. There still exists a chasm in our world. We don't have to get on the other side of death to feel it. Many earthly sufferings are not random. They exist along the fault line of finances. Of income. Of economic policy. The chasm, the gap between the rich and the poor is not only a first-century reality, but a continuing lament. Our fates are often divided between those who have and those who have not. We have gotten (sadly, perhaps) better at dividing our communities so that there are few of us who live in comfort who literally step over our homeless neighbors to get to work or church. But sometimes we might feel as though we are too aware, helplessly aware of the sufferings around the globe, and in our own communities, just a few blocks or miles away.

Jesus invites us to train our eyes to be His eyes. To notice the gap, the chasm, now. For it is not God's intention that we be so disconnected from one another. It is to our

detriment, both rich and poor, or somewhere in between. Opening our eyes may involve seeing anew the One who crossed a great chasm to be with us, who moved from heaven to earth, from earth to hell, and back again, to be seated on the right hand of the One from whom all blessings flow. In Christ's presence among us, God says, "I am not content with the chasm between us, and among you."

Jesus was teaching those who would listen, including those Pharisees, and any other "lovers of money," what and who they should be loving instead. And the first step is recognizing others as the children of God that they are. Sometimes it is through an act of compassion that we do not expect.

Some years ago, Nat and I were in downtown Oklahoma City. We were in a hurry to get to a breakfast place, excited about a precious few hours for a daytime date courtesy of one of our parents, who came to watch our newborn at the time. Apparently we had not been out in too long a time, because in the midst of a downpour and in a hurry to get where we were going, we parked our car along the street, and we momentarily forgot that in a city you usually have to pay for parking. Suddenly, there was a man standing in front of us. Wearing oversized clothes and worn sneakers, he stood in our way, holding a sign. I assumed that he was asking us for money, but he didn't. Instead, he told us we had better go back to the kiosk and pay for a parking spot to avoid a ticket. Then I saw that he wasn't just holding a sign but also a big stack of magazines, the Curbside Chronicle. We bought a magazine and gave him extra in thanks for saving us a parking ticket, and left to get into a restaurant. It was only later when we were waiting for a sumptuous meal that we leafed through the pages of the Chronicle. It had a fashion shoot in the center section. The models, showing off OSU and OU fan fashion for the fall season, were all homeless. Each photo included the person's name and hometown and a big smile. It was a moment of repentance. An eye-opening display not only of our connection, as all of the people pictured were actual fans of these college teams, just like we were, well for one of those teams. But the photos also invited us to really see, and appreciate, those citizens who were experiencing homelessness all around us, those that I would have normally passed by without time to buy some magazine I thought I didn't need. Turns out I did need it.

I, we, do need the prophets. We do need the One who rose from the dead to pull us back to life. Back from a life that does not circle the drain of money and wants and fears and obsessions. Back into proximity to one another, if we have eyes to see.

The name of this sermon – Proximity Project - is inspired by a non-profit group in Minnesota called the Proximity Project. Its mission is to help churches, congregations, and places of worship see themselves again, or anew, and see their neighbors, and then work on simple ways to bridge the gap, to cross the chasm, between them. For some churches, it is installing a walking path around their properties and inviting neighbors to experience some solace. For others, it is organizing a prayer walk for their members, to physically get into their communities and pray their way down each block, perhaps noticing the gaps between needs and prayers. The Proximity Project's belief is that proximity is a gift that God has already given us, one to another. "Through the

avenues of placemaking and real estate development, [the Proximity Project] empowers churches to connect their mission and their story to their physical place in the neighborhood in creative and dynamic ways.”<sup>1</sup> It sounds a lot like the mission of the Home Team initiative in our congregation, working with some of our neighbors who find themselves in the gap between homelessness and affordable housing.

One saying about money is that if you hold a penny up to your eye, it will be bigger than the sun. If you hold it at arms’ length, it’s just a dot. We cannot separate ourselves from money and the policies that influence how it is used and held and accumulated. Jesus, though, relentlessly calls upon us to look to the needs of the poor, the most vulnerable, the unseen, the unwell, and understand that the chasm between us is not fixed. It can be crossed, as we see Him in those who are hungry, or thirsty, or sick, or held captive. As we offer a drink, as we look for Him in each person, as we see ourselves not only as helper but as sibling in Christ, one to another, we understand that our own healing has been at stake as well. In these efforts to follow Jesus and what He taught, we find ourselves experiencing “life anew, that life that really is life.” And the hope that Jesus offers us that there is a way from here to there and with His help we are moved by faith to cross it.

We have every reason to take hold of this life that really is life. Life that isn’t consumed with consumption. Life that isn’t wrapped in stifling accumulation, but sees our proximity to one another as possibility and gift. Jesus shows us the way: see one another, help one another, advocate with one another, and we begin to cross that chasm between us, and all our lives will be made richer. Whether 20,000 miles or to the next block, near and far, here to there, in crossing that chasm, we follow Jesus into life.

May it be so for you and for me. Amen.