

Streetsville United Church

Sunday, September 29, 2019

Rev. John Tapscott

“A BRIDGE ACROSS THE CHASM”

Luke 16:26

From Luke 16 we read a story Jesus told about a very rich man named Dives and a very poor man named Lazarus. Dives drove a high-end vehicle, lived in a large house with a pool and hot tub, and wore expensive suits. Lazarus was a street person. Sometimes the police gave him a ride to jail or the Salvation Army for a meal and a night's stay. But often they ignored him and Lazarus just slept on the sidewalk.

There was a gate in the driveway leading up to Dives' home. Lazarus, hungry and covered with sores, came and sat against the gate. If only someone would come out to give him scraps from Dives' table. But only the dogs came to Lazarus and licked his sores. Occasionally Dives noticed Lazarus as he drove out his gate. He thought about calling the authorities to have Lazarus removed but then let it go. Pretty soon Dives didn't notice Lazarus anymore.

Both men died. Lazarus went to heaven to be with Abraham, while Dives went to Hades. Dives had rarely experienced any discomfort. But here there was no pool. No air conditioning or water coolers. Dives was in torment. He looked up and saw Abraham far off with Lazarus by his side. Dives cried out, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in these flames." Abraham replied, "Son, remember that in your lifetime you received good things, while Lazarus received evil things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us."

Now let's pause and ask - is there any chasm that has been finally fixed? Is there some great gap that can never be crossed? Perhaps, but remember this - God has given us his word. God has given us Moses and the prophets and the one who rose from the dead. Through his word God has built a bridge across the chasm.

There are many chasms in this world starting with great valleys and ravines in the earth's surface. I would like to see the Grand Canyon in person some day. Much of Toronto was built on land between deep ravines. We could say the same for Mississauga. We don't notice those ravines now because bridges cross them and join communities together.

There are other types of chasms. The parable reminds us that there is a chasm between rich and poor. There is a chasm between nations, especially first world and third world nations. There is a gulf between different races and cultures and religions. There are great political and

philosophical divides. Chasms of estrangement may open up in families. In many ways the world is so divided. And building bridges can be challenging indeed.

Ever since Adam and Eve disobeyed their Creator, humans have sensed a big gap between God and us. We haven't been quite sure that God is for us. We have feared God. God has seemed more like a stern judge than a loving father. So we tried to build a bridge to God through good works and animal sacrifices, even human sacrifice. But these shaky bridges never gave us security or seemed to bring us closer to God. And Jesus' story speaks of the great chasm between heaven and hell, between the place of eternal agony and the place of eternal blessedness.

These chasms are not God's will. And God has done for us what is impossible for us to do ourselves. In Moses and the prophets and in Jesus Christ, the One risen from the dead, God has laid a bridge for us. Through his word God has built a bridge across the chasm. We only have to listen and trust and obey.

Dives was not condemned to Hades because he was rich; he wound up there because he didn't listen. There in Hades, Dives finally started to show concern for others. He said, "Father Abraham, send Lazarus to...warn my five brothers, so that they will not also come into this place of torment." Abraham told him, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them." Dives said, "No, Father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead they will repent." Abraham said, "If they don't listen to Moses and the prophets, they won't be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." Here we see Dives' big sin. He hadn't been listening to God's word. In the synagogue he had turned his hearing aid off. Or he daydreamed and ignored the message. Not listening to God's word always gets people in trouble. It puts us in mortal danger. But the brothers could still avoid Dives fate if they only they would listen to Moses and the prophets and the one who was raised from the dead.

Dives was not in Hades because he was rich. And Lazarus was not in heaven because he was poor. Lazarus was in heaven, because somewhere along the line he had heard and trusted God's word. The name Lazarus means "the one whom God helps", so in his distress, maybe even as he was dying, Lazarus cast himself on God's mercy. There was no other helper for him. And God did help him; God reached deep into his poverty and drew him into eternity where he was comforted. There is no blessedness in poverty other than this – that the poor may recognize their need for God in a way that the self-sufficient rich do not.

In fact, in this world the large gap between rich Dives and poor Lazarus could have been bridged if Dives had been listening to God's word which says, "There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore, I command you to be open-handed toward...the poor and the needy in the land." People like Dives believed that riches were a sign of God's blessing upon them, and that poverty was his means mean of disciplining the poor, so it was best not to interfere with God's work. It was bad theology, and it came about because they weren't listening to God's word. God's word always builds a bridge between rich and poor. God's word reveals God's special concern for the poor and the needy, for widows and orphans. But Dives didn't listen and therefore didn't act. He didn't listen to God's saving word, either. He wound up in Hades.

But the good news for all who will listen is this. Through his word God has built a bridge across the chasm opened up by human sin. Take that great chasm between God and humanity. All our efforts to build the bridge fall short. For we are, by nature, poor sinners and lost souls, who cannot help ourselves. But we are Lazarus because in Christ God has helped us. Through Jesus, the word made flesh, God has built a bridge from heaven to earth, on which fallen humanity may cross over to God. Paul tells us "... there is one God and one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus who gave himself as a ransom for all." John writes, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." Whoever hears this word and steps out on the bridge named Jesus Christ by faith is at peace with God. The chasm is closed. God is near to you and you to him. When you recognize your spiritual need and put all your faith in the Saviour, you are a forgiven, redeemed, reconciled child of God, an heir of eternal life. That's why you and I put all our trust in him and renew our faith often through word and sacrament.

Through his word God has built a bridge across so many chasms of this world. Through his word God builds a bridge between different cultures and religions. In every major religion, the Golden Rule is found in one form or another. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." For those who listen that is a bridge on which people can cross respectfully to one another. No, we don't all believe the same things, but on that bridge we can at least get along with one another and live in peace. Last spring the Raptors basketball victory was a bridge which drew diverse peoples together, at least for a time. The Golden Rule is an even stronger and more permanent bridge between people. We only need to listen to the word God has given us and practice it. It's right there in Moses and in the prophets and in Jesus. And in his word, God brings those who have more than they need together with those who do not have enough. We saw that bridge in Moses' words, quoted by Jesus himself.

The writer Michael Coren shared this story in a newspaper column. Coren writes, "It was a hot Toronto summer night. A homeless man asked me for some money. I usually offer food rather than cash, and go into the store to buy him a sandwich and a coke. He followed me, which was hardly surprising. This guy was in very poor shape. He trembled, his clothes were ripped and filthy, and he smelled. I put the food on the counter and the woman serving looks at me, then at him, and then finally back at me. Her words were simple. "Are you two together?" She was asking if I was paying, but that question seemed to take forever to answer. "Yes," I finally said, "we're together." And the chasm between Coren and the poor man was bridged at least for a time.

In fact, that reminds us of the bridge God built to a lost world in Christ. The Holy God came to shabby, sinful humanity in his only Son, took on our flesh, made the sacrifice on our behalf and said in effect, "we're together. The chasm between us has been bridged. Put all your trust in me and don't be afraid."

God builds a bridge between people by instructing us to pray for one another. Paul writes, "I urge that prayers be made for all people, for all who are in high positions..." Praying for others, even for enemies, is a bridge which brings divided people together. Through his word God has built a bridge across every chasm which divides us. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female for you are all one in Christ Jesus." And when Christ returns all chasms and

gaps will be closed forever. “Every valley will be exalted, every mountain made low, and the rough places made plain.”

As we end I must ask, “Was Dives consigned to eternal agony? Is there a bridge from hades to heaven? Or will that great chasm never be crossed?” Jesus’ parable shows that there is a time when it’s too late to hear and respond to God’s word. But that time has not yet come for any of us, who even today can say “Yes” to God and to his Son, Jesus Christ. If you’ve never done that, it’s not too late to step out in faith on the bridge God has built for your salvation. “Now is the day of salvation.” Is it too late for the dead who failed to listen and respond in this life? Might they still have a chance to respond to God’s invitation? I don’t know. We do know that God’s bridge of mercy reaches very deep. Jesus descended into hell to preach to the captives in prison. So for as long as we can, we keep sharing the Gospel. We continue to pray and hope for all people.

God has given us Moses, and the prophets and his own dear Son, whom he raised from the dead. Through his word God has built a bridge across the chasm. Are you listening?