

BRIDGING THE DITCH
Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church
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Luke 16:19-31

Those of you who were here last Sunday may recall that we looked at the parable of Jesus that has come to be called the Parable of the Unjust Steward. We observed that it is generally considered to be the most obscure parable that Jesus ever told, and we would be helped by some additional information in order to understand it.

Today we have another parable of Jesus, but the problem today is just reverse. We have, not too little information, but too much. Our problem is not that we can't understand it; our problem is that we understand this parable all too well.

There are lots of characters in this parable: there's the rich man, and the poor man, Lazarus; there's Abraham in heaven; there are the five brothers. Part of the parable takes place in this life, and part in the life to come. But in all this parable, with its various characters and change of scene, there is one constant: the ditch. Do you see it there—the gaping chasm that runs right down the middle of the stage? The ditch never changes. What changes is who is on which side of the ditch. So let's tell the story about the ditch.

Once there was a ditch, a gaping canyon that ran down the middle of—well, it ran down the middle of the world. As far as anyone could remember, the ditch had always been there. There was land on each side of the ditch, and people who lived on the land on each side of the ditch. But what a difference in the two sides.

On one side lived a rich man. There is no doubt he was rich. You can hear it in the words used to describe him: purple garments, fine linen clothes, tailored Armani suits, Bruno Magli shoes. And every meal was an event: oysters on the half-shell, veal in cream sauce, poached salmon, baked Alaska for dessert, and a fine wine to wash it all down.

Over on the other side of the ditch was a poor man: covered with sores, squatting at the gate hoping someone will throw a nickel in his cup, so weak that he can't even keep away the neighborhood dogs that lick at his sores.

Back on his side of the ditch, the rich man spent his time at the office checking his investment portfolio, making a few deals which will add to his already considerable wealth. Later his chauffeur would drive him home. He took considerable pride in the place. The land on his side of the ditch looks splendid. The lawn service had been there to mow, blow, and go. The grass looked like the putting green at Augusta. Flowers were nicely planted around the columned porch.

The only thing that messed up the picture was that guy out by the front gate begging. He was from the other side of the ditch, but somehow he made it up close to the house of the rich man. What an eyesore. The rich man checked with the police, and they told him that the man is on public property and that he has gotten a begging permit from the welfare office, so technically there was nothing they could do. So the best the rich man could do was to endure the man, and try not to look in his direction as he pulled in the driveway. As he passed by, he muttered to himself: "I wish there were some way to put that guy far away from me so that I would never have to be near him again." The rich man had no problem with the ditch. He just wished it were bigger.

But maybe we're being too hard on the rich man. There's nothing in the story that says he was a bad man. He even allowed the beggar to have some of the leftovers from the kitchen, which isn't bad. Nor does this parable say it's a bad thing to be rich. Sometimes we hear that—"All rich people are evil!" No, nothing about that here.

In fact, that ditch that separated the rich man from Lazarus was not something the rich man had concocted. He hadn't dug it. It had been there all along. The rich man could never remember a time when the ditch hadn't been there. Sure, this poor man was often at his gate. But most of the poor lived over on the other side of the tracks. No poor person could afford to live in his neighborhood. There were zoning laws, after all, that kept any old person from throwing up a shack next door and living there. Think of what such a thing would do property values.

When the rich man traveled around town, he knew better than to cross the ditch; he kept carefully to his side. He avoided the poor parts of town. He took the Jerusalem expressway to drive over and around them. The clubs and business organizations he

belonged to were made up of folks like him, from his side of the ditch. Those clubs didn't have an official rule to keep out the riff-raff, but no poor person could have afforded the fee, and besides, you had to be nominated and approved by a club member before you could join, and no one that he knew would be so foolish as to nominate someone from the other side of the ditch.

The rich man found that his life took him mostly to the places that the poor could not go. It wasn't that he deliberately tried to avoid them. It's just that there were no poor in the board rooms where he met in business meetings, no poor at the exclusive resort at the beach, no poor at the exercise club, no poor at the fine restaurants. To associate with the poor, he would have had to go to the welfare office or the health clinic or the jail, and they were on the other side of the ditch. He wasn't a bad man. He just didn't go there.

The main feature of this parable is the ditch. Do you see it there? It had already been dug long before the rich man and the poor man had been born. And when anybody tried to suggest some way or other of bridging the ditch, others would shrug and say it couldn't be done. That's just the way the world works.

So the rich man knew nothing of the life of the poor man. He knew nothing of having to move from one place to another to stay ahead of the bill collectors. He knew nothing of living from one paycheck to another, or going to one of those check-cashing services that charges exorbitant interest rates, of standing in line to fill out a welfare form. The rich man lived on the other side of the ditch, where he was always promptly and courteously ushered in—no hassle, no waiting. His life and the life of the poor man were lived in totally opposite ways, on totally opposite sides of this big ditch that runs down the middle of this parable.

And then he died. And so did the poor man. Cause of death not specified in either case, but we can guess. The rich man died of a stroke brought on by high cholesterol brought on by too much fat in the diet. The poor man died of eating too much food out of a dumpster, and too little attention at the emergency room.

What they both discovered was that in the next life the ditch was still there. The rich man had never paid much attention to the ditch in life, but now he could see it clearly. Father Abraham explains the situation: You had good things during your life and the poor man did not. So now the tables are turned. There's been a ditch switch.

The rich man, now without even a drop of water to cool his parched tongue, calls out to Abraham: “At least go warn my five brothers about this ditch, so they can change their ways.”

“Why do they need extra warning?” asks Abraham. They already have all those places in the Bible that talk about caring for the poor.”

“I know,” calls out the rich man, “but if someone came to them from the dead, then they’d be sure to listen.”

“Hmmm, I wonder,” muses Abraham. “It seems to me that if they’re not going to pay attention to the Bible, then why should they pay any attention to someone who would rise from the dead?”

It has been suggested that if we are to see ourselves anywhere in this strange story, we are most like the five brothers. After all, they still have a chance to repent, still have a chance to fill in the ditch that separates one human being from another. They still have a chance to understand that worshiping God is not just a private spiritual matter between a person and God, but it is also about how we treat one another.

It is not easy to do, as the rich man discovered too late. There is so much in our world that keeps us apart. It takes energy and imagination to figure out ways to bridge the gap.

But we have an advantage, one which the rich man and his five brothers did not have—we have someone who has risen from the dead, who tells us in no uncertain terms that we cannot love God unless we also love our neighbor.

Who dug the ditch? Who’s digging the ditch today? And do you see anybody who is trying to fill that ditch in, bridging the gap between rich and poor?

And above all, what is your contribution to the ditch? Are you trying to fill it in, or are you making it deeper?✠