

“The Gulf of Privilege”
Luke 16:19-31
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19th Sunday after Pentecost

Sometimes I wish Presbyterian theology allowed for purgatory. I say that mainly because I spent a fair amount of time in purgatory in middle school. We called it In School Suspicion – ISS for short. It was the place where the really bad kids were sent to sit and do nothing except write “I will not use profanity with my teachers” 500 times. We weren’t even allowed to do homework. I’ve asked around and I don’t think ISS exists in most schools anymore. Somebody seems “to have decided that punishing kids by taking away their education is probably not the best approach for school. But whether or not the punishment fit the crime I confess I was always guilty.

There was the time when Ms. Wilson¹ caught me passing notes with a girl who was confessing some particularly painful things going on in her life that she was struggling to deal with. Ms. Wilson had earned the reputation as the school gossip – the teacher who penetrated into kids’ lives in inappropriate ways so when she commanded me to bring her the note, I said, simply, “I don’t want to do that.” “Bring me that note, now” she said with increasing urgency. “I’m sorry, Ms. Wilson, but I cannot bring you this note.” “You will bring that note to me right this minute, young man.” Realizing retreat was no longer an option, I quickly tore the note into as many tiny pieces as possible before turning it over: three days in school suspension. There was the time I told my band teacher that he could. . .well, I can’t say what I told him, but it got me a week in school suspension. And then there was the gun.

We were in the final weeks of production of West Side Story. I landed the part of Chino, the spurned lover of Maria who had fallen for Tony, a boy from across the tracks. Spoiler alert – Chino shoots Tony and since I went to an Arts Middle School with a theater department that was determined to put on Broadway quality musicals with 6, 7th, and 8th graders, I was given a starter pistol that looked like the real thing. I’m ashamed to say it now, but as a 7th grader, I loved that gun. Guns weren’t allowed in my house – not even toy guns except for the contraband ones I kept hidden in the crawl space with a set of throwing stars and a crude set of nunchuks hand sawn out of a wooden broom handle. So when the director gave us a 15 minute break one late afternoon and a group of us Sharks went chasing after the Jets through the deserted school hallways, the gun went with me. I was chasing a

¹ Names have been changed to protect the innocent.

² Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. “The Impassable Gulf: (The Parable of Dives and Lazarus),” Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Birmingham, AL, October 2, 1955, pp. 237 – 238,
http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/Vol06Scans/2Oct1955TheImpassableGulf-TheParableofDivesandLazarus.pdf.

friend, gun drawn and pointed when I turned the corner to see from a distance our assistant principal.

I went to the middle school located in the poorest part of Raleigh, NC, in a mostly black public housing community – what my friends who lived there affectionately referred to as the projects. Drug activity was common, and shootings not unheard of. So when our school's black assistant principal, sounding more like a police officer than a teacher commanded me to “drop my weapon immediately,” he sounded like a man who believed the gun I was carrying was real. And I complied like a student who knew I was in trouble much bigger than tearing up notes or swearing at teachers.

At the time, I didn't think through all that was messed up about this situation. How unfair it must be as an African-American kid growing up in that neighborhood to know that you'd be treated one way for running the through halls of your school with a fake gun, while someone else in a suburban school might get different treatment. When my punishment consisted only of a stern reprimand and new restrictions on when I could pick up that gun, I didn't think through the fact that my white skin was probably a major factor in the school deciding that I had just made an adolescent mistake. And I couldn't yet know the complexity of a black assistant principal making a decision that might have been influenced by the biases of the dominant culture with an outcome that benefitted me and harmed people like him.

Through the years, I have come back to that memory many times wondering how it would have been different if I had been black and my principal had been white. Would it have been case of 7th grade kid making a mistake or a young black man threatening other students? And how would it would have been different if the man at the end of the hall had been a police officer? As frightening as I imagine that situation, I can't help but conclude that the main thing in my favor in that moment was simply the color of my skin. White privilege – that term that makes the simple observation that there are certain benefits attached to white people in our society beyond what is commonly experienced by non-white people in the same society. It could be the main reason that assistant principal gave me the benefit of the doubt. It is certainly the main reason why the world as it is, at least where we live, favors people who look like me.

That concept of privilege is at the heart of the story today. A rich man feasts sumptuously at his table every day while Lazarus, lying at his gate goes hungry, ailing, ignored. For a lot of us, this text raises questions about wealth and non-wealth, questions that ought to be raised. How do we serve the poor and not overlook them? What policies should be put in place? What should I do at the stoplight when someone asks me for money? Those are good questions. Luke circles around them again and again.

But what stands out to me about this story is the blindness of the rich man to his own privilege even after he's cross over to the other side. “Father Abraham,” he cries out, “have mercy on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue.” Send him to serve me. I can't do that Abraham says. It's too late for you. “Send him to my father's house,” the rich man goes on. Even now, the rich man doesn't see Lazarus as a brother, but as someone who's primary role

should be to meet his own needs. It's often said that you can't take your wealth with you when you die. But Luke's rich man carries his privilege intact.

In 1955 Dr. Martin Luther King, suggested something similar in his own sermon on this text. There is nothing inherently wrong with being rich he said, just as there is nothing inherently virtuous with being poor. Abraham was considered the richest man of his time, Dr. King pointed out, and if there is a hell, he went on, there will be plenty of poor people in it.

No, the rich man's greatest sin was that he "accepted the inequalities of circumstance as being the proper conditions of life." "He took the "'isness' of circumstantial accidents," Dr. King said, "and turned it into the 'oughtness' of universal structure. He adjusted himself to the patent inequalities of circumstance."²

My worry with this latest rash of police shootings leading to more deaths of more black men in our country is that many of us are becoming so weary that we are in danger of adjusting ourselves to the patent inequalities of circumstance. We have thought wrongly that YouTube videos of shootings will automatically lead to change. We have thought wrongly that the right articles or Twitter points, or marches will automatically lead to change.

If we're not careful, those images can have the opposite effect. Augustine, the great African bishop, writing in the 4th century, confessed that he often found himself attracted to plays that depict tragic and sad events. Though he thought of these plays as evoking mercy and compassion, he realized that, in fact, the sadness he experienced was a kind of pleasure in and for itself. "How real is the mercy evoked by fictional dramas?" Augustine asked. "The listener is not moved to offer help, but merely invited to feel sorrow."³ He could have been writing about our 24 hour news cycle.

And here's where the arc of Luke Gospel must overtake the question that keeps many of us up at night, and certainly keeps the preacher awake late on Saturday nights – the what then *should we do* question. What then *should we do* not just to gain justice for Keith Scott, not just for Terence Crutcher but to make our country safe and fair for all people? What then *should we do* to wean our country from its love affair with violence?

Luke answers a different question. Given that God is preparing a banquet one that's going to be spread as wide on earth as it is in heaven, how then are you going to live? Given that fairness and justice is coming, how will you reorder your

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³ I thank Scott Bader-Saye for connecting this quote from Augustine to this text in his theological perspective on Luke 16:19-31 in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 4, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 117 -118. Augustine's reflection is from *The Confessions*, translated Maria Boulding (New York: Vintage Books), 1998, 38.

own life? The urgency of Jesus' action comes not from the awareness of injustice and violence run amuck, but from the confidence that God is overcoming it.

Which is good and challenging at the same time if you've looked across our history and seen the depth of racism in our history and culture. The systemic structures of racism are old and wise. As old and as wise as a rich man who has accomplished much in life except the wisdom to see a man suffering at his gate as his brother. Those old structures of racism won't be moved by any quick fixes. They must be worn down with sustained pressure, like a glacier whose slow and steady march moves mountains and carves out lakes.

We're called to be a small, but important part of that pressure. In the way we lay hands on each other and remind each other of our humanity and equality before God. In the way we expose white privilege and the damage it inflicts on all of us. In the way we talk through the little slights and the big injustices that threaten to divide. In the way we surround each other with prayer, spread a table wide, and act together to reform the way we police, the way we worship, the way we serve.

Dr. King ends his 1955 sermon by suggesting that as God has already bridged the biggest chasm – the one between God and human beings. So naturally God is bridging the gulf between brothers and sisters. But Dr. King also leaves us with a warning not to lose sight of God's urgency. And if Presbyterians can entertain any kind of purgatory, it's that one that I want to leave us in today. "There is a gulf," King concedes, "but the gulf can be bridged by a little love and compassion." "It is now passable," King ended, "but it can become impassable."