

Open the gate!

Luke 16:19-31

September 25, 2016

Audio excerpt from Clarence Jordan, "The Rich Man and Lazarus"
(http://www.firstcongucc.org/Texts/pdf_files/Media/ClarenceJordan.mov)

πλουσιος (plousios) and πτωχος (ptochos) ... rich man and beggar ... one they party with and one they spit on ... one clothed in the finest fabrics and latest styles and one clothed in sores ... one feasting sumptuously -- sumptuously! -- every day and one hoping just for a scrap, a few crumbs, a small piece of bread.

Different men in very different circumstances, with different fortunes and very different prospects. But it was not their differences that kept them apart.

What kept them apart?

A gate.

And who built the gate?

The rich man. The πλουσιος (plousios). He built the gate to keep beggars out, beggars like Lazarus. Just like they all built their gates to keep the undesirables, the unfortunates, the "Others," on the other side. Just like we build our gates.

πλουσιος (plousios) and πτωχος (ptochos) ... rich man and beggar ... one carried by angels and one planted in the ground ... one sitting in company with Abraham and one tormented in fire ... one enjoying the consolation of which he had been so long deprived and one hoping for just a drop of water from the tip of Lazarus' finger on his tongue.

Different men in very different circumstances, with different fortunes and very different prospects. But it was not their differences that kept them apart.

What kept them apart?

A great gulf, an uncrossable divide, a deep ditch, a gate.

And who built the gate?

You already heard Clarence Jordan say something about this parable. Dr. Jordan, a New Testament scholar, founded Koinonia Farm in 1942 with his wife and another Christian couple. κοινωνια (koinonia) is a Greek word meaning communion, fellowship, community, togetherness, and Koinonia Farm was founded as an intentionally "interracial, Christian farming community" dedicated to "the equality of all persons, rejection of violence, ecological stewardship, and common ownership of possessions." Millard and Linda Fuller came to Koinonia Farm on 1965 and when they did their lives were utterly transformed. The Fullers went on to found the ministry now known as Habitat for Humanity.

Clarence Jordan says of this great gulf, this deep ditch:

This is really the cutting edge of the parable, this yawning chasm. It's broken up traffic. The bridge is blasted. Big chasm between 'em. We can't get to you. You can't get to us. Who dug that ditch? Who dug that chasm? Where did it come from? The rich man knows who dug it. HE DUG IT! And why did he dig it? He dug it to break up traffic. He dug it to keep guys with sores out. He didn't want the value of his property to go down when sore people moved into the neighborhood. You know, you'd better be careful how you dig ditches to keep people out; you might want to cross them yourself some day. Be careful when you blow up bridges. You might want to cross that bridge some day. This rich man is caught in his own trap.

Caught in his own trap. Locked in behind the gate he built himself.

We are talking this fall about the politics of Jesus. What can we learn from this parable about the politics of Jesus? Well, who are Jesus' constituents? Who are the people he represents, the people for whom he advocates, the people whom he serves? People like Lazarus.

Jesus is very much engaged in politics, deeply concerned about issues of power and wealth and the ways they are distributed among all God's children, but Jesus would have made a very bad politician, because he has no interest at all in currying favor with the rich and powerful. In fact, much of what he says and does is expressly intended to provoke such people. No, he gives his attention and his time to people like Lazarus, eating with them, attending to their sores, forgiving their sins, affirming their humanity.

Did you notice? Lazarus is named. In Jesus' story, the poor man is given a name. He is a person, a particular human being. He matters enough to Jesus to be given a name, but the rich man is just "that rich man."

And yet. And yet. What is the point of Jesus' story? Who is it who needs to be saved? The rich man! Saved from what? Saved from being trapped forever behind his own gate!

The political implications of this story may surprise you. It's not, first if all, about promoting charity or more effective programs to combat poverty. It's not about prodding or shaming rich men to go down to their gates and hand food through the bars to beggars in the street.

No, it's about unlocking the gate, throwing open the gate, even tearing down the gate. And not merely to let Lazarus in, but to let you out! It's not that he needs help from you, but that you need help from him!

Or maybe, it's that you both need each other. We need each other. We are not meant to be kept apart by gates, especially by gates of our own making. The politics of Jesus is about unlocking gates, bridging divides, filling in ditches, removing barriers, establishing relationships.

That's why, I think, the work of the Job Foundation is so important and so effective, because it's not about writing checks or giving handouts, but about building relationships, building mutually beneficial relationships over time.

When we invited Grin & Grow into our building many years back, we did so to address a vital need for children in our community and their parents, but maybe what mattered most, maybe what matters most, is that we opened our doors, opened our doors to the people of our neighborhood. It matters to moms and dads to have a safe and nurturing place for their children, but it matters to us because we are no longer kept apart from the people among whom we live.

When Kathleen and Lauren and Katherine and Maria and Zoe and Leah and Laura and Japhy and Katy and I went to West Virginia this last June, we went to work, to help, to make life a little better for somebody. But somebody had a name: Barbra. And Barbra gave us more, so much more, in spirit, than we gave her by the work we did for her. We went to help her, but she helped us! It's about unlocking gates, bridging divides, removing barriers, establishing relationships.

I don't spend much time helping with community meals. I am there on a second Monday afternoon every third or fourth month, helping cook and prepare the meal. I don't usually stay to help serve the meal -- there are other team members who come to do that -- but when I have, I mostly stay in the kitchen, on this side of the serving window ... on this side of the gate.

Now I don't have all the answers and I'm not one to pretend to be any kind of role model, but I'm just saying, just trying to listen carefully to Jesus. Maybe as important as it is to prepare and serve that meal, maybe it is just as important, maybe even much more important -- important to us, important for our salvation! -- to sit down and share some food and conversation with a neighbor.

Dear Lord! Do not let us be trapped behind gates of our own making!