

Minding the Gap

Sermon 32 | Greystone Baptist Church | September 29, 2019

Luke 16: 19-31

If you've ever ridden the underground train in London, you have probably heard the recorded warning that plays over the PA system when passengers are about to board or disembark from a train. If you haven't ridden the train, but you have been to London, then you've probably seen the stickers and memorabilia touting the popular cautionary phrase: "Mind the gap." The saying first appeared in the London Underground in 1968 when the need for a standard, recorded warning emerged. There were several trains that pulled up to curved platforms, creating a physical gap between the train car and the edge where passengers waited to board. This gap created danger for unaware passengers who might trip while getting on or off the train. At that time, it cost more to have a longer message, so the British came up with a short phrase that saved money by communicating quickly and clearly. "Mind the Gap." The phrase took off among tourists and remains incredibly popular to this day.

You can hear it on the loudspeaker as the train approaches. You can buy it on a t-shirt, stickers, or keychains. Everywhere you go in London (as a tourist at least) you are reminded of the quirky necessity of minding the gap.

Hearing today's reading from Luke's Gospel feels like it should come with its own word of caution, reminding us to "mind the gap". As readers on this side of the divide between heaven and earth, we are struck by Abraham's warning that there is no crossing from one side to the other. No crossing from heaven to earth, warning sinners to repent; and no crossing from heaven into hell to soothe the torment of the flames for those who received their reward on earth. In this parable, the lines are drawn, the chasms are great, and there is no room for negotiation. "They have Moses and the prophets," Abraham says, "if they do not listen to them, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead" (v. 29 and 31).

I worry, like the Rich Man, that Moses and the prophets will not be enough.

Moses gives us the ten commandments and represents all of Torah Law.

In those books we read:

Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.

Do not kill, steal, cheat, or lie.

Do not commit adultery.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,

with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.

You shall welcome the foreigner, and treat him as a native-born,

for you were foreigners in Egypt.

And we recognize the words of the prophets who consistently warn us against storing up treasures on earth for ourselves but using our resources to take up the cause of the fatherless, to plead the case of the widow, to heal the sick, and to defend the oppressed.

Still we, like those listening to Jesus two thousand years ago, struggle to live in accordance with the prophets and the law. Most of us do ok with the big ones, we don't kill or steal, we try not to lie (too much). We love God the best we can, but when it comes to loving our neighbors – foreign, poor, and otherwise different from us, well, that becomes a little more complicated.

Through our reasoning and perhaps through a little bit of fear chasms begin to emerge between us and them.

We know that we're dealing with a parable today and so in some ways both Lazarus and the rich man are caricatures of all of us. The rich man lives on one side of a gate, where he is clothed in fine purple linen, he feasts sumptuously and doesn't seem to want for much. Just on the other side of the gate, Lazarus lives an opposite reality, where the rich man is clothed in linen, Lazarus is covered in sores. The rich man is overly fed while Lazarus' waits for a crumb to fall from the table, like a dog... meanwhile the actual dogs lick his wounds. On one side of the gate, a man lives in agony, while on the other side another man lives in excessive comfort. The gate is a vertical chasm that could not be crossed. Otherwise, the rich man might have called Lazarus by name, or shared some of his food, or even just noticed that he was there, suffering just on the other side? The gate is a chasm that could not be crossed otherwise Lazarus could have helped himself to the crumbs as they trickled down, falling from the table.

And after they die, their roles are reversed. It is Lazarus who is comforted in bosom of Abraham and the rich man who is tormented. The gate that once towered above the earth has inverted to become a deep gap, an impassable chasm that continues to keep the two main characters apart from one another.

In reading and reflecting on the text this week I couldn't help but to hear a constant refrain saying, "mind the gap." And with it a painful recognition of all the gaps that we encounter each day, often without even noticing them.

There is a growing gap between the rich and poor, squeezing out the middle class and making it harder for economic mobility to occur. There is a gap in our education systems that enables certain schools to consistently out-perform others, and a puzzling connection between educational outcomes and economic resources. There is a gap between those who have access to healthcare and those who do not. There is a gap between those who have access to good food and those who do not.

There are ideological gaps between republicans and democrats that play out in just about every important issue. There are generational gaps between digital natives and digital novices making it harder for people of different ages and life experiences to come together to share wisdom and insight. There are gaps, chasms, everywhere, and they are becoming more and more difficult to traverse as time marches on.

And so I hear the call of the prophets saying, “Mind the gap.” Pay attention to that distance that is growing between you because before too long, you won’t even know that it’s there. Before too long, we might become like the rich man, feasting at our tables, blind to the gate and those who live on the other side of the gap- or worse, realizing too late that the time to act has come and gone.

Considering all of Jesus’ parables, this one is not difficult to understand so much as it might be difficult for us to hear. It presents for us, in no uncertain terms, the same dualistic worldview and polarized assessments that we buckle under today. This parable offers us no promise that chasms can be crossed, or gaps can be bridged... it is almost hopeless, for the rich man, and unfortunately, for most of us, who... when we’re honest, have more in common with the rich man than we do with Lazarus.

It is hopeless, almost.

Just before we give up on this parable and lose all hope, we take a step back and recognize that the very person telling the parable is one who crosses the chasm of life and death, of heaven and earth. The one who is telling this story to the “money-lovers” (v. 14) is one who would rise from the dead and echo the words of the prophets. The one who tells the story is the one who’s very first sermon proclaimed release to the captives, justice for the oppressed, and hope for the hopeless. Even though the story describes the gaps that cannot be bridged, the one who tells it is building a bridge with his life.

And he calls us to follow him.

We have been learning from the parables for a few weeks now and each week we are called to see and hear. See with new eyes and hear with new ears. Sometimes that call is to see the tiny mustard seed and recognize that with God’s help it boasts miraculous growth. Sometimes seeing and hearing means not giving up on ourselves and others when we’re in the weeds, but trust that God isn’t through with us yet. And sometimes it means asking for God to help us build bridges where we thought the gap was impassable. This may be the hardest lesson for us to learn, because everything around us would have us believe that our problems are too big, that our neighbors are too different, and that we will never get along with them.

Considering the rich man and Lazarus, it’s easy to believe the two men didn’t have much in common in this life, but neither did they have an opportunity to discover that about one another. What might have happened if the rich man had thrown open the gate and welcomed Lazarus to dine at his table, to dress in his clothing, and to recline as a guest in his home?

In the same way, I wonder what might happen if you and I were to open the doors of our homes and welcome others in for a meal? Might we discover that despite gaps of age, economics, or life experiences we have vast resources to share with one another... resources like joy and laughter, food and comfort, wisdom and creativity?

I wonder if we became a community that shared our resources, might we discover pathways to building some bridges? We might start small, but even in doing that we could develop the skills and earn the trust required to meet neighbors and strangers alike in the middle of some of our greatest divides.

It is no secret that we are living in one of the most polarized and divisive historical moments that our nation has ever seen. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg spoke about this moment and her ability to be hopeful about the future noting that she has seen so much change in her lifetime, which leads her to believe that we can change the current environment for the better. Speaking with Meredith students on Monday she challenged them to be a part of that change. "Whatever you do for your job," she said, "Do something outside of yourself, something that will make your community better for those less fortunate than you, and something that brings people together... do something that will help repair the tears in your community."

Ginsburg's call echoes the wisdom of Moses and the prophets who remind us that our faithfulness is found in the process of emptying ourselves for the sake of those who are less fortunate than we are. Our repentance is marked by our ability to turn away from ourselves and into love of God and love of neighbor.

The greatest sin of the rich man in Jesus' parable isn't that he had money. It's that he allowed it to blind him from the pain of the world around him. Rather than using it to ensure that the poor were lifted up, the foreigners welcomed in, and the oppressed were set free, the wealthy man in the parable made sure that he and his wealth stayed on his side of the chasm, in his life on earth and for all eternity. Despite the call of Moses and the prophets, the rich man did not see and he could not hear his brother Lazarus crying out on the other side of the gate.

More than ever before we are in need of people who can see and hear across great divides. More than ever before we are in need of people who can mind the gaps, who can spot them, approach with caution, and perhaps warn others heading that way... "there's a chasm ahead, proceed carefully."

But more than that, we are in need of people who can not only mind, but people who can mend the gaps. I wonder, with God's help, if that might be us? Might we step beyond the comfort of our sides of the gate and consider what could be gained by welcoming a stranger; and might we also consider all we have to lose by choosing to ignore those who suffer on the other side of our gates.

Justice Ginsburg doesn't only talk about repairing the tears of our social fabric, but for decades she modeled what this slow mending looks like. She and the late Justice Antonin Scalia represented two ends of the spectrum when it came to constitutional interpretation. They would often write dissenting opinions pointing out all the ways the court (and each other) had it wrong when it came to a decision. And yet they maintained traditions of traveling together, sharing New Years' Eve dinners together, appreciating music together, and most importantly interpreting the constitution together. "We were different," Ginsburg said, "but we were one. Different in our approach to reading legal texts, but one in our reverence for the constitution and for the institution we served."

Ginsburg and Scalia were menders of the gap when it came to the law. And we need more menders like them.

Menders in more areas than just politics and the law, menders who can give generously of their financial resources to support our neighbors in the Bahamas...

Menders who can work to build relationships with refugee communities at home and abroad as we live into our calling to love the foreigner and welcome the stranger...

Menders who can work day after day to secure access to healthcare and healthy food for all who live in our communities...

Menders who will teach our children in public schools...

Menders who will reach beyond their social circles to build friendships with people who are different from them...

Menders who will build and sustain a church for all people – a church that will not fall victim to the convenience of simply minding the gap, but one that works to mend it at every turn.

If we are bold enough to listen to Moses, to listen to the prophets, and to follow Jesus into the chasms that separate us from one another, perhaps we might discover that we have everything we need right here...

Perhaps all it takes to mend this world is a few brave and faithful souls with eyes to see, ears to hear, and courage enough not only to mind the gaps, but to mend them with courage, with kindness, with generosity, and with compassion.

May it be so.