

Walls and Chasms
Catonsville Presbyterian Church
November 10, 2019

(Based on sermon preached in Lansing, MI on September 29, 2019)

Luke 16:19-31

¹⁹“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²²The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’ ²⁵But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. ²⁶Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’ ²⁷He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house—²⁸for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ ²⁹Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ ³⁰He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ ³¹He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

Thank you to Ken for the opportunity to preach today. I thought it would be helpful to add a few words of introduction. As many of you know, I work for the Presbyterian Church national office, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, focused on ministries with refugees, asylum seekers and other vulnerable immigrants. As part of that work I am invited to speak around the country and on occasion, to even preach. Today’s sermon was originally written as a sermon that I preached

at First Presbyterian Church of Lansing, MI at the end of September. And the Luke passage that I just read was the lectionary reading for that day.

Now as someone who is expected to preach about refugees and my ministry, it has been suggested that I could have 2 or 3 “stump sermons” that I simply repeat since I am preaching at different churches. I like the discipline of the lectionary cycle and I also believe in the power of scripture. That you can read the same passage over and over again and yet, it can still speak something new to you. And so, before choosing the familiar Bible passages, I like to at least read the scripture “assigned” for that particular Sunday.

This story about the Rich man and Lazarus is not a typical text used to talk about refugees and foreigners. In fact, there are 92 other explicit Bible passages that all talk about welcoming the stranger and this story is not one of them. And I apologize in advance if you were hoping for some Greek lessons (sorry Ken) or a carefully studied exegesis of the text. But, with God’s help, I do hope you might hear something new.

Let us pray . . . O God, source of all light, by your Word you give light to the soul. Pour out on us the spirit of wisdom and understanding that our hearts and minds may be opened. Amen.

A young Honduran mother with her almost 3-year-old daughter entered the sanctuary of a small Presbyterian church in Juarez, Mexico, next door to a community center turned shelter. She had just come back from buying a new pair of flip flops from a local street vendor. After introductions and chatting about our respective families, I ask about her journey. Elena (not her real name) arrived in Juarez in February with her 2 daughters (6 and 2 years old) and her husband. They are from the town of Progreso in Honduras.

They came to live at the Pasos de Fe shelter in April. Elena tells us that she didn’t leave Honduras because she just thought it would be nice to go to the U.S. “We wouldn’t have left if we didn’t have to leave,” she said

As her husband explains, “we left Honduras to escape the gang threats. I wasn’t in a gang at all. My wife got into a fight with a woman from a gang and a man jumped in and I had to jump in to protect her. The gang started putting death

threats on our door that they were going to rape and kill my wife. We were warned not to go to the police. We did. And, immediately as we left the police station the gang found out and they burned down our house. The police and the gangs work together there. I got our two little girls and my wife, and we left with just our clothes.

As we continued to talk, more details of their journey came tumbling out. Elena shared with us photos of their journey – several days sleeping on the pedestrian bridge from Guatemala to the Mexico border at Tapachula Mexico. When they finally got their chance to cross into southern Mexico, they left in such a hurry that they lost most of their personal belongings. And yet they carried on.

Another 8 nights under a bridge in Mexico DF. When they first arrived in Juarez, they stayed at another church but had to leave when they hit their time limit. When they first arrived in Juarez their little girl was gravely ill, suffering diarrhea and nausea, severely malnourished. Today she has fully recovered as she runs around the sanctuary and puts on newly acquired Chapstick. She is full of smiles and laughter. Her older sister is in school. Elena's husband has found work in Juarez for the time being. They are doing their best and are remarkably positive even as they wait in uncertainty.

Conversation turns to daily life at the shelter and again as we talk there are smiles and laughter. "We came here and it's good," says Elena's husband. "We can stay as long as we want and there's no pressure. Everyone cooks their own meals because we all have our own foods. The Cubans eat how they eat, and the Mexicans also make their own food. Their cheese here isn't as strong as ours but I have found some. We go downtown to buy it. Our destination is Tampa, Florida. I have family there and we talk often. They're waiting."

Elena and her family are being assisted by a Human Rights organization to help them to apply for asylum in the U.S. By the time they got their first appointment with U.S. immigration, however, the "remain in Mexico" policy was already put in place. And so, they have to come back to Juarez after every court hearing until a final decision is made. At their recent court appearance, they were told to come back in February, 2020.

When I looked up today's scripture and read this familiar story about Lazarus and the rich man, I had just been to the US – Mexico border. A border described as one of the most disparate borders in the world because of the juxtaposition of wealth on the north side and poverty on the south. And so, when I opened my Bible and read today's passage in the immediate aftermath of my visit to the border, where I met Elena and others, for the very first time I did not hear a story about 2 individuals but instead of 2 nations.

You see I had just spent the day before meeting Elena and her family, visiting a shelter in El Paso also housing asylum seekers. And on the surface, there are so many commonalities in how many faith communities in the U.S. and in Mexico are helping – offering a roof over their heads, food, showers, medical attention, and compassionate, loving care. And you hear many of the same laments by the shelters on both sides of the borders -- that the building is not adequate, that they don't have enough food, or money to pay the bills, or enough volunteers. But when you visit the shelters on either side of the border side by side, you quickly see that there are also stark differences.

It is true that the shelters in El Paso were stretched beyond their means, especially prior to the new asylum policies that send people back to Mexico. And yet there is no denying the differences in resources and basic infrastructure when you leave the paved streets of El Paso and drive into a neighborhood in Mexico with dirt roads, where electricity can go out at any time and there is no potable water. There is no denying the differences in resources between large, independent buildings bought or rented to house a hundred or more refugees and a small community center built to provide sewing, computer and other life skills classes now filled with bunk beds and make shift beds in every open space. Or a church whose very sanctuary has been turned into a dormitory and the courtyard as the gathering space for shelter residents to eat and socialize.

And here we have this story about Lazarus and the Rich man. Lazarus with Abraham and the Rich man in Hades pleading to Abraham for help. And Abraham, saying "..., between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us."

And again, I think of my border visit. We actually spent some time along the border fence or wall. We learned from Border Patrol about all the different technology used in building the wall and defending our nation's borders. We stood and spoke to Mexican children on the other side. We learned about a bi-national city now divided. We took time to pray. Later in the day, one of the members of our group said – "I have come to think that the wall is simply a physical manifestation of a barrier that already exists in our country."

"Between you and us a great chasm has been fixed."

It is hard for me to hear not only government leaders, but Christians, members of churches across the U.S. who say that our country is too full, or our country does not have enough resources to help. When I have seen with my own eyes crowded refugee camps and hotels, churches and schools converted into make shift refugee shelters in other places. Countries that open their borders and their doors to provide refugees a safe place to stay even as their own country is suffering from droughts, conflicts and insecurity. Who give not out of their abundance, but out of the generosity of their souls.

Countries like Jordan where 1 in 3 persons is a refugee, or Uganda, or Kenya.

While people who live in the U.S. are saying, please Lord, not here, not now, not us.

Then the rich man begs Abraham to help his brothers, by sending Lazarus to warn them of their fate. But Abraham refuses.

³¹He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'

While in Lansing, I had the honor of participating in a refugee summit hosted at the First Presbyterian Church to talk about what is happening with U. S. refugee resettlement. The U.S. Government under President Trump has been steadily withdrawing from resettlement, first cutting its annual resettlement goal from 85,000 to 50,000, then 30,000 and now to only 18,000 refugees.

Stephanie Nawyn, a local sociologist, shared some difficult statistics about how many U.S. Christians are opposed to welcoming refugees and do not see it as a responsibility of our country. And that fostered a brief discussion about the importance of Bible Study and theological reflection. We wondered how it was possible for Christians to express such strong anti-immigrant views given the many references to welcoming the stranger in both the Hebrew and New Testament scriptures.

Scriptures such as:

Deuteronomy 10:17 -19

¹⁷ For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, ¹⁸ who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. ¹⁹ You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Ezekiel 47: 21-23

²¹ So you shall divide this land among you according to the tribes of Israel. ²² You shall allot it as an inheritance for yourselves and for the aliens who reside among you and have begotten children among you. They shall be to you as citizens of Israel; with you they shall be allotted an inheritance among the tribes of Israel. ²³ In whatever tribe aliens reside, there you shall assign them their inheritance, says the Lord God.

When I lead workshops, I often ask people about why they think the Bible has so many references to welcoming the stranger. At one such gathering, a person answered that it must be important. Another person said that it is like the teachings of Matthew 25, it is the “Christ like thing to do.”

One of those 92 texts about strangers is indeed found in Matthew 25. A passage that speaks both to the situation of Lazarus the beggar and to the alien seeking refuge. That is the passage when Jesus talks about the King dividing the nations into two groups, like sheep and goats, another division. And Jesus says to those on his right hand –

“Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”

And here’s the thing, Jesus doesn’t conclude that they should do these things to be like Him. Jesus says --

“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

I once asked a pastor why he set up a temporary shelter in the basement of his church to receive Central American families passing through his town. And he responded, “I didn’t go looking for this. But when Jesus is knocking at the door, you have to open it.”

I am so proud to be part of the Presbyterian Church USA with a long history of speaking up and reaching out to refugees in welcome. Where hundreds of congregations every year carry out acts of welcome and accompaniment – teaching English language classes, organizing teams to accompany a new refugee arrival, tutoring, mentoring, befriending and advocating as their partners.

How many times did the rich man walk past Lazarus without even seeing him? How many times did he pass on the opportunity to respond to Lazarus’ cries for help? It is not always easy to welcome the stranger, but if we are willing, we open ourselves to holy encounters. If we are willing, we just might see Jesus.

May it be so.