

“Fixing the Chasm”

Sermon by Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16

Luke 16:19-21

I have never been as thirsty as the rich man in Luke. The closest I can imagine to the rich man’s thirst comes from times I have visited people in the hospital, who are not allowed to drink anything before surgery. They are desperate for a sip of water, or for ice chips-- but all the hospital gives is these little wands with sponge at the end. I remember the first touch of the sponge wand to the tongue is like a tongue to a frozen, metal telephone pole-- the tongue is so dry that it cannot even move across the sponge. But as the water leaves the sponge onto the tongue and then lips, these parts begin to move once again with more freedom.

The rich man in Luke was in a similar agony, with no sponge in sight. Did the cracking of his lips, and the sticking of his dry tongue to the roof of his mouth, and the swallowing that felt like sand in his throat make him think of the suffering of the poor man Lazarus, whose wounds were licked by the dogs at his gate while the rich man passed by, *right by him*, dressed in purple linen and ready to feast? No. In fact, the rich man *did* think of Lazarus, but only in a way that would serve his purposes and relieve his suffering. The rich man asked Abraham-- no, he *demand*ed Abraham-- to send Lazarus from his place among the angels to go down to Hades to comfort him. But in God’s heavenly ordering, there is a reversal. The poor do not exist to serve the rich, as is often assumed in this life.

In his time on earth, the rich man has fixed the chasm between himself and Lazarus. That chasm in the afterlife remains just as fixed-- and yet to the rich man’s surprise, he and Lazarus reverse positions of favor.

The word “fix” means a couple of different things in English. It can mean to hold fast in such a way that it will not move. In English, “fix” can also mean to repair. In Southern, it can mean to *prepare*: “I am fixing Sunday dinner,” or “I am fixing to go.” The way Luke uses the word, in Greek, is *estEriktai*, which means the chasm “has been established” or the chasm “stands fast.” So the Greek does not allow the possibility of reading the chasm as something that is repaired, or prepared, but as something held in a permanent place.

But I wonder if we could bring our English speaking lens to the text, even if that is not what the Greek meant. *What if* the chasm between the rich man and Lazarus had been fixed, as in repaired? Wouldn't things have looked differently, both in this world and in the world to come?

When I studied with him in seminary, the Archbishop Desmond Tutu often said that heaven is going to be full of surprises. On the recent event of the death of Phyllis Schlafly, a clergy friend of mine commented, “Now she knows.” Schlafly had spent years spewing judgement in the name of Christianity, saying that HIV and AIDS were God's punishment on people with unconventional lifestyles and demonizing women for working outside of the home. My clergy friend, Michael Kirby, prayed for her saying, “In eternity's embrace, may all of her disdain and hatred fall away in a refining grace. May that be the peace in which she rests. May [all those she judged] welcome the eternal part of her with a love and grace born of the very God she purported to understand.”¹

I am going to go back to speaking Southern now. The chasms we create on earth are the chasms we are *preparing*-- or *fixing*-- for ourselves in heaven. Jesus calls us, however, to *fix*-- or *repair*-- these chasms in *this* life. Jesus, one who in his very body bridges the chasm between human and divine, can give us hope that these chasms can indeed be bridged.

¹ Jan Edmiston, PC(USA) moderator, quoted Michael Kirby in her blog, *A Church for Starving Artists*.

Recently someone in the name of politics gave an unfortunate analogy about refugees, using Skittles candies. He said, “If I had a bowl of skittles and I told you just three would kill you, would you take a handful? That’s our Syrian refugee problem.²” One response on social media to this racist analogy was this: “Is there a chance, a really good chance, I would be saving someone from a war zone and probably their life if I ate a Skittle? I would eat the Skittles. I would gorge myself on Skittles. And when I found the poison Skittle and died, I would make sure to leave behind a legacy of children and friends who also ate skittle after skittle after skittle until there were no skittles to be eaten. And each person who found the poison Skittle we would weep for. We would weep for their loss, for their sacrifice, and for the fact that they did not let themselves succumb to fear but made the world a better place by eating Skittles. Because your real question is, ‘Is my life more important than thousands upon thousands of men, women, and terrified children?’”³

Jesus repeatedly models a repairing-- not cementing-- the chasm between rich and poor, between suffering and comfortable, between privileged and oppressed. This work of repair is one thing we need to do before we enter the kingdom of God. The work of repair of the chasm is one way we will find that God’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Jesus has already begun this work of repair, and needs us to be his partners in continuing it. This work of repair may require sacrifice. It may make us uncomfortable. But it can also lead us to healing and can lead us to deeper peace. It can lead us closer to God.

When you leave this sanctuary, I invite you to take a skittle or even a handful of them. Feel the burst of flavor on your tongue- the sour sweetness that activates the juices in your mouth. Even a dry mouth will moisten with such an invitation. I am not doing an advertisement for

² Said by Donald Trump, Jr. on Sept. 19, 2016

³ Facebook posting by Eli Bosnick on Sept. 20, 2016

Skittles. I am instead doing an advertisement for the kingdom of God. May we be so thirsty for it; may our mouths water for it. Amen.

In just a minute, we will have a ritual of healing and anointing. This Christian practice dates to biblical times. Anointing is both a sign of God's calling, and a sign of God's healing. We know in this country at this time, we are in deep need of healing. This past week especially we know we need healing and repair from racism. We need healing and repair from violence. We need healing and repair from fear. But in order to be doing the work of healing and repair, we also need to find healing and repair in our own souls. Jesus offers that. Our deacons are a witness to that. You may approach them, and they will speak words of blessing as you receive the mark of oil, and if you want you may state something for which you want healing.

Remember, God's mercy is in fact abundant. God will repair your soul-- all you have to do is turn to God.