

“Seeing Across the Chasm”

Based on Luke 6:17-26

First delivered Feb. 17, 2019

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I want to ask those of you who watch late night chat shows, like the Tonight Show, for instance, have you ever noticed that the host who is interviewing the guest has his chair positioned so that he is slightly higher than the guest? It’s very subtle, but it is done to almost subconsciously communicate who is in a position of authority in the show. It is the host’s show and he is in charge. Think about when you have found yourself in a court room. In every court room I have been in, the judge not only sits behind a desk but is elevated higher than anyone else in the courtroom. Again, this communicates a level of authority. Now look where I am standing, behind this pulpit, a position of authority.

I know of a church in Oklahoma City called Church of the Servant. The sanctuary of that church was like nothing I had ever experienced before. The ceiling had skylights to let in natural light. There were lots of indoor plants, a waterfall, and even, if I remember right, some birds they had flying around in there. The seats were arranged like in an arena. On the floor was centered the altar. So, when the sermon was being preached, the pastor was actually at the lowest level on the floor while everyone else was sitting in their stadium seats. You could see everyone and all their attention was down at the center. I thought that was pretty cool. It removed any obstacles from seeing what was happening and it sort of flipped the signal of where the authority figure was.

This morning our scripture reading was the beginning of a sermon Jesus preached. It is similar to the Sermon on the Mount we find in Matthew. But the setting is different in Luke. Here, Jesus comes down the mountain to a level place. And it is from there, standing level with the people gathered around him, that Jesus preaches his sermon. Clearly he has the authority. Everyone was there to hear him and to be healed by him. He did not need to be physically elevated above the crowd. There was no obstacle that blocked people from having access to him. Jesus

came down to the level of the people. I think that is significant. Jesus placed himself in a position where the people could get to him, where he could look at them eye to eye, where they didn't have to go up a mountain or stand on their tippy toes to shake his hand while he stood behind a desk, a pulpit or a barrier. I am so tempted to step down from this pulpit and give this sermon from the floor.

Jesus starts off his sermon by saying some things that run counter to who we typically value and bless in society. Jesus blesses the poor and curses the rich. Well, maybe not curse them, but certainly letting the rich know that they better enjoy what they have now because it won't get any better for them than it is right now. The poor, though, they have something to look forward to. The poor are the ones who are blessed, lifted up, elevated. The rich are given a message of woe. For them, things will get worse. It is the poor that will be better off.

I tell you, it just doesn't seem that way. What is blessed about being poor? It seems like everything goes against poor people. Yes, there are social services. But they can often be hard to access. And you have to go to different places, wait in line, keep up with paperwork, to access these services. The housing you get is probably substandard. Getting good, quality food at a reasonable price can be a challenge. The schools most poor kids go to are often run down. There is a lot of trauma around being poor and that trauma plays out in broken relationships, violence, stress, drug abuse and mental health issues. I could go on and on. There is nothing I can see that's good about being poor. I think most of us would rather be rich. If you are rich, there are plenty of resources you can access that others can't tap in to. You have a powerful network of relationships that can make life easier for you. People who are rich have lots of options, lots of freedom, lots of support. Being rich doesn't seem like a bad deal to me.

But Jesus seems to be pushing against what seems so obvious to us. Blessed are you rich and woe to you poor. Jesus flips it around. Jesus wants the poor to hear good news. Remember? That's Jesus' mission statement, which he read from the book of Isaiah when he started his public ministry. Part of his mission is to proclaim good news to the poor. And so he does by telling the poor that the kingdom of God belongs to

them. They don't have much in this life, in this society, but they do belong to the kingdom of God. Jesus is giving the poor hope that one day they will be full and they will laugh. One day, the blessings the poor long for will be theirs. There is hope for the poor. God is with the poor.

The rich, on the other hand, need to be reminded that God is paying attention. All that wealth they have is meant to be shared with the poor. If the rich forget that, and hoard all they have for themselves and for their children's inheritance, God's going to take it away from them. Later, in Luke 16, we read the story of Lazarus and the rich man, traditionally named Dives. You remember the story? Lazarus was a poor man who laid at the door step of the rich man's house. He longed for just a scrap from the heavy laden table in the rich man's dining room. Dogs would lick his sores. He was poor, hungry, and full of sorrow. The rich man was full, laughing at his dinner parties he had all the time, and apparently paid no attention to Lazarus.

Lazarus dies and is carried up to heaven to the bosom of Father Abraham. The rich man dies and is buried. He descends to Sheol where he is tormented by flames of fire. Looking up to Lazarus and Father Abraham, the rich man begs for relief from the pain, the suffering that he is enduring. "But 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.'" Blessed are the poor and woe to the rich. This was part of the prophetic witness of Jesus, a witness that can be traced all through the prophets in the Hebrew scriptures. What Jesus is preaching in his sermon isn't new. And it still has an edge that provokes, that comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable, as the old phrase goes. That's what prophets do.

Prophets can get themselves into a lot of trouble. Jesus said it himself. Jesus said that prophets are excluded, reviled, and defamed. They also get killed. John the Baptist was a prophet. He chastised King Herod for the way he was living and got his head cut off. Jesus was a prophet. He was crucified because of the things he said to the religious authorities. He was portrayed as a threat to Caesar's power and authority. We know that prophets are excluded, reviled, defamed, and killed. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a prophet. Oh, he's famous now. He

has a memorial in Washington, D.C. and a federal holiday. But not many people wanted to build a monument to him when he was assassinated. He said things about our involvement in Vietnam that turned a lot of people off. He advocated for the government to either be the employer of last resort or provide a basic income to every American because, in his mind, it is intolerable that there would still be American citizens and children of God living in abject poverty in the richest nation on earth. That got him derided as a communist. He was helping to organize sanitation workers in Memphis when he was killed. He was in the middle of planning a poor people's campaign, an ambitious program that would bring together poor people, white and black, to march on Washington and demand that the federal government do what it is supposed to do, which is to promote the general welfare, as stated in the preamble to the Constitution. King knew what it was like to be excluded, reviled and defamed. That's how prophets get treated, even to this very day.

This series of sermons we are in is generally focused on the topic of who are the people in our community, who is the "other" that we are to love. Love God, and love one another. Who are the "one anothers"? What do we learn in today's scripture about who we are to be in a loving relationship with? It appears to me that the people that were crowded around Jesus were a mixed crowd. There were poor people in the crowd who needed to hear the good news. But there were also rich people in the crowd who needed to hear a prophetic word. Jesus didn't just preach to or heal poor people. He healed rich people too. He preached to rich people as well. He healed and taught all who came to him, whether they were rich or poor. And he gave his message in a way that spoke to the needs of the poor and the rich. The poor and the rich needed the message Jesus gave them.

So this is our challenge: to be in relationship with poor people and rich people. In these days the gulf between the poor and rich is not just in the size of bank accounts. There is a social gulf that is so vast. It takes effort for poor people to be where rich people are and vice versa. Reflecting back on Jesus' story of Lazarus and Dives, Father Abraham said to the rich man, "There is a great chasm between us and you that

has been fixed. No one can cross over from here to you and none can cross over from where you are to us.” It seemed that when Lazarus was lying at the very doorstep of the rich man’s house there may as well have been a great chasm between them. We know that a great chasm separates the rich and poor today.

Where are we able to cross that chasm in our society? The DMV is probably the most likely place where poor and rich are forced to be together in one space. Everyone has to get a driver’s license. You know our society is divided up in ways that separate. Poor people have public housing and public libraries while rich people have private schools and private country clubs. How do we be in relationship with the poor and the rich when we live in a society that keeps us apart?

We have to figure out how to remove the obstacles that block us from being in a loving relationship with poor people and rich people. Jesus came down the mountain and stood on a level place where everyone who wanted to could get to him. No barriers. Everyone had access. What are the barriers that we need to remove?

I would like us to think about what internal barriers block us from being in loving relationships with poor and rich people. Maybe you avoid being in relationships with poor people because they make you feel uncomfortable. They act different or hold different values. You don’t want to be caught up in a dependency where they are always asking you for help or you feel guilty about all the comforts you have while they go without. And maybe you are uncomfortable around rich people, find them a little intimidating. They seem so much smarter, more sophisticated, maybe a little standoffish. What are your feelings or biases toward poor people and rich people that you need to acknowledge and overcome?

Jesus came down the mountain and came to a level place. And a crowd gathered around him to be healed of their diseases and to hear him preach. He placed himself so that he could see the people eye to eye, so that the people could reach out and touch him. Jesus removed obstacles so that everyone could get to him. When it came to Jesus, there was no great chasm. Anyone who wished could get to Jesus. No barriers.

We can do this too. We can put ourselves where the crowds are. We can allow ourselves to connect with others who need healing from their dis-ease. We can speak the gospel that people need to hear. We can look at people eye to eye. Taking the lead of Jesus, there is no reason for us to erect obstacles that block us from placing ourselves at the same level with anyone else. So I invite you to look past the barriers that separate us one from another, especially look past whether the person you are relating to is poor or rich, to walk with Jesus over those chasms, so that we can make connections with anyone who is willing to connect with us.

I was a little kid in junior high. I had just gotten old enough to be in my church's youth group. We were all loaded up on the church bus to head out for a youth retreat. It would be my first time away from home. Sitting by myself on the bus, I looked out the window and saw my dad waving good bye to me. I waved back. And as the bus began to move forward the tears started streaming down my face. I was already home sick and we hadn't even left the church parking lot.

Someone on the bus noticed me and saw that I needed a friend. His name is Jake. He was an upper classman and one of the cool kids. He is also black. He saw this little white kid who needed to know that everything was going to be ok. Jake came over and sat with me for a little while and just talked to me. Throughout the weekend, Jake would check in on me and make sure that I wasn't stuck sitting somewhere by myself. He went out of his way to make sure that I was included, that I belonged to the group. Jake saw past the barriers of race and of age and made a connection with me. Jake and I became friends. And that made a huge impact on my life. Getting past the barriers, of rich and poor, of white and non-white, of citizen and non-citizen, of elder and child, and all the other ways we are divided up in this society, and making connections with people who need healing, who need to hear a word of hope or a word of challenge, who need a friend...this can impact lives in ways we may never know.

Let us pray.

O God, the One who crosses all barriers to be in relationship with all people, the One who crossed barriers to be in relationship with each one

of us, we ask you to help us through the power of the Holy Spirit, to cross all the barriers, internal and external, that block us from being in relationship with others, so that through us You can speak a word of hope, a word of challenge, and a healing touch. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.