

## **Minding the Gaps**

**(I Timothy 6:6-19); Luke 16:19-31**

*Ute Molitor, First Congregational UCC in Camden, September 29, 2019*

When you travel on the subway in the UK, you always hear a voice saying “Mind the gap!” as you are about to step from the safety of the platform onto the safety of the train. In between is that chasm leading down to the ground and the actual rails. You don’t want to get caught there or lose something or someone precious to it. Gaps are the spaces in between and can be threatening or life-giving, depending on the circumstance. Gaps in our schedule can allow for a time of respite, a moment to catch your breath between activities. They may represent a time of exploration. Think of how many young people are opting for so called “gap” years after high school or college. A running back thrives on finding the gaps between defenders on the football field. We may have gaps in our memory - this may actually be a protective measure in cases of trauma or it might be the harbinger of memory loss.

Gaps can also refer to our own contradictions or lack of understanding. We just don’t get something. We are stuck. We cannot think or imagine our way into another reality. The current political and cultural polarizations in our country are evidence of this. It is also the case of the rich man and Lazarus in our challenging story from the Gospel of Luke. Let us turn to it now.

The description of the rich man’s clothes sets the tone. Purple and fine linen were for high ranking officials and members of the royal family. He would be strutting about in a hand-tailored suit, Italian leather shoes, all designer glasses and be chauffeured in a fancy car in our day, maybe followed by a security detail. He feasts on five-star cuisine food daily. Right outside his gated house lies a poor man named Lazarus. His name is derived from ‘Eleazar’ which means ‘God helps.’ The rich man completely ignores Lazarus who is starving and has open sores that get licked by dogs.

We are told that both men die but have completely different experiences after their death. I would like to encourage us not to get caught up so much in trying to sort out

whether these images of the afterlife are literally true real or not. Since this story is only found in the gospel of Luke which was written in an environment shaped by Hellenistic (Greek) Judaic thought of the late first century CE, the imagery may be truer to Luke's environment and images of the afterlife than that of Jesus. In any case, the images are intended to get everyone's attention and I would like to focus on the gaps that are symbolized by them and their implications for our living here and now.

As many a Jew would have hoped for, the poor man Lazarus rests peacefully with his ancestor Abraham. However, the rich man who likely believed that his riches were signs of God's blessings, is experiencing torment and can only see Abraham and Lazarus from far away. He feels cut off, anxious and confused. He appeals to Abraham as his father and asks for mercy. At the same time, the rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus to bring him some water. In other words, Lazarus remains an object of service for the rich man who is used to getting his way (Luke 16:24). Abraham does acknowledge the rich man as his child. They are still in relationship but Abraham then names the chasm of experience the two men had in their life time. The rich man received his "good things" during his life time and Lazarus "evil things."

If we were to imply that God grants each of these experiences intentionally, it would not make sense to then have a story of the rich person suffering later unless God just plays some strange games with us. Rather, Jesus' constantly challenges his listeners and followers not to get attached to money as a source of meaning, dignity, or even something to worship. In his text from the first letter to Timothy today, Paul also names that money can be the root of all sorts of evil (I Tim 6:10). Therefore, I cannot read this story from Luke as simply neutral on the role money -its acquisition, assigned meaning and use - has played in creating a gap between the rich man and Lazarus.

It is the relational gap that is at the heart of the story. It is only in the afterlife that the rich man even perceives that there is a problematic gap between him and Lazarus

that should concern him but his concern is once again focused on his own well-being. Abraham names this gap and essentially gives no hope to the rich man of ever crossing over (Luke 16:26). In response, the rich man has something of a shift in his consciousness which shows some level of care for others. If he cannot cross, then maybe at least his five brothers can be warned so that they change their ways and avoid suffering. However, once again, he is asking Abraham to use Lazarus to do the work of warning his brothers. The man still has not related to Lazarus directly and his care does not extend beyond his own blood family. And so Abraham again rejects the request and essentially tells him, that enough has already been given through the law and prophets for them to know how they should live (Luke 16:29). And, no, they will not believe even if someone from the dead comes to talk to them (Luke 16:31). (I wonder if this is a veiled critique by the author that people did not believe in Jesus as the risen one).

As long as the rich man cannot see Lazarus as an equal child of God, he cannot find healing and new life. As long as the rich man cannot see that healing and transformation are needed by all for the good of the whole, he cannot live a resurrected life. He is still too stuck in his individualistic, tribal, exclusive, abusive and presumptuous paradigm. Until he sees that the human gap between him and Lazarus needs to be bridged existentially, he cannot move forward. It would not be enough to have shared some of his riches. Until he is willing to begin to see the world through the eyes of one left to rot on the streets in front of his house, the gap is not closing.

We also need to mind our gaps. Where does what we say we believe and value and how we act and speak not align? Where are the gaps in your life and in mine in our perceptions and how they shape our relationships? Jesus highlights the places of our own blindness to the plight of others and how we collectively participate in unjust systems and practices that leave some to rot. It seems to me that making it harder and harder to receive asylum in this country is a gap. Saying we love the environment while not addressing climate change for the sake of future generations of beings, not

only humans, is a gap. The list goes on....

Gaps can be opportunities to step out of our comfort zones or our assumptions in order to see the world and another person's life from a different perspective. I would like to tell you a story about an encounter in Thailand in which some individuals stepped into gaps to help each other so that all were left feeling more whole.<sup>1</sup> The characters do not address some of the underlying systemic issues but they are examples of what needs to happen in our hearts so that we mind gaps that can and need to be bridged.

Some years ago, a young boy was caught stealing from a small shop in his Thai village. The shopkeeper was very angry and confronted him in the street. She took things out of his pocket and shook the boy while yelling at him. He kept his eyes downcast in humiliation and fear. He had taken a bottle of medicine and another small item. The upset shopkeeper continued to berate him. The boy could not find words to reply. The owner of an open market restaurant next to them saw and heard what was going on. He walked over and encouraged the woman to calm down. Then he touched the boy on the shoulder, looked at what he had taken, and calmly asked him: "Is someone in your family sick?" The boy just nodded 'yes.' Then the shopkeeper took money out of his pocket and called out to his young daughter who was at their food stand to pack up some vegetable soup. The girl was at first put out but then did as her father had told her. Then the man paid the shopkeeper for the medicine and gave it and the soup to the boy. The boy didn't know what to say, quickly grabbed the soup and ran home.

Years later, the owner of the restaurant was back at his stand as usual. A homeless man came by and asked for some food. The kind man responded with his usual

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<sup>1</sup> If you would like to see the brief video featuring this story, go to: <http://gawker.com/this-three-minute-commercial-puts-full-length-hollywood-1309506149>.

generosity and handed the man some soup. Just as he had done so, the restaurant owner collapsed right there and then. He was rushed to the hospital and kept in the ICU. His daughter, by now a grown woman, sat by his side as much as she could. She quickly realized that she did not just have to fear for his life but also for the family livelihood. They did not have health insurance and received a medical bill that was beyond their ability to pay. She agonized about what to do and eventually felt that she had no choice but to post a 'for sale' sign on their little market restaurant.

One evening while visiting her father in the hospital, the young woman fell asleep at his bedside, exhausted from all her worry. When she woke up she found that a piece of paper had been placed just under her hand. It turned out to be a new version of the hospital bill. This time, the total sum of payments listed was "0." Under the formal bill, was a handwritten note: "This bill was paid a long time ago with kindness and a bag of vegetable soup." It turned out that the doctor involved in treating her father had been the boy caught stealing so long ago. He had become a doctor so he could help other families in need.

I think of the restaurant owner as a person who knew how to step into a gap in a good way. He saw the chasm between the boy and the shop owner who went after him. The restaurant owner minded the gap, stepped into it and asked for understanding first. He cared enough to understand the boy's story. He wanted to know where the real hurt was, what the need was, and how it could be addressed. The man's kindness and compassion left a lasting impression on the heart of a boy who knew suffering at an early age. The boy used his own suffering to learn how to support others in need.

Two lives of generosity engendered more generosity beyond family bonds in the face of scarcity. It is such living and seeing that can bridge what feel like real chasms. The rich man in our story could not grasp this yet and as long as he could, his experience would be that of a chasm. I hope and pray that we keep our hearts and eyes open collectively and individually to mind the gaps we encounter. God, the one who "helps" (recalling Lazarus' name) is already waiting in them. May we approach them

with the faith, love, endurance and gentleness that make for living in “right” relationship (=righteousness) that Paul admonishes in I Timothy 6:11. May the Holy Spirit challenge, transform and embolden us that we may truly come to taste and share the love of God for all of creation.