

Luke 16: 19-31 “Mind the Gap” Rev. Janet Chapman 9/25/22

In my travels, one of the things that I never got used to is the subway. Whether in New York or Europe, subway is the preferable mode of transportation. It is mind boggling to me that there are so many there who don’t drive, they just take the subway. In Europe, as the doors opened to let us off the subway train, I can still hear that monotone voice announcing, “Mind the gap... mind the gap.” At first, I didn’t have a clue what it meant so Mikayla pointed out the slight gap between the floor of the train and the subway. It seemed small but apparently posed a risk for those who weren’t paying attention, something which has plagued me all my life. I have broken my ankle multiple times, including my first trip to San Francisco, never having seen cobblestone streets before and promptly tripping over a protruding stone. Then I had the same experience several years later in New Orleans. Those falls kept me from experiencing amazing sights and thrills of the cities around me. I guess I needed some kind of sign on those historic streets to mind the bumps lest I stumble and fall.

Today’s scripture is a parable which, for me, acts like a sign flashing, “Mind the gap, mind the gap” lest I fall and miss out on the glories around me. There once was a rich man – there always is. He is the first mentioned in the story. He is the one who worth noticing, the one who will claim our major attention. He is, as he is expected to be, the main character. But always in the shadow of the rich man there is this other one, his counterpart, the poor man. Note that whenever we find great wealth, it will always be shadowed by great poverty. Unlike other parables, this story doesn’t stay in the realm of first-century village life. It spans this life and the next. It is realistic in its portrayal of the vast gap between rich and poor. According to Alyce McKenzie, the story reflects the ancient belief that the righteous and the wicked can see each other after death. There was an understanding that wherever one ended up after death, you would be able to see others in the good place or the bad place. Jesus, being a learned teacher, would have known the story’s background which comes from Egyptian folklore about the reversal of fates after death. It also holds connections to Jewish rabbinic stories. It’s found only in Luke and follows the author’s theme from Luke 1:52, God will “put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalt those of low degree.” The audience Luke directs the story to is none other than the Pharisees because they are “lovers of money”

and Jesus is attempting to show them that one cannot serve God and wealth at the same time.

Our story is like a three act play with the first scene being about the life the rich man and poor man have on earth. It is more descriptive than action-oriented as the rich man is shown wearing fine linen and having banquets at every meal. The poor man is covered with sores, probably has no health insurance, and eats whatever gets discarded from the local restaurants and soup kitchens. His only friends are the animals. In biblical literature, dogs licking the man's sores is a symbol of disgust and disrespect. However, I prefer to take the approach that the dogs are not torturing but soothing his pain, because that is why dogs lick. Therefore, the dogs have more compassion for this man than his neighbors. Still Jesus, the storyteller, is trying to describe a sharp contrast between the rich and poor. There is no spillover, no middle ground, from one to the other. It is as though a great chasm stands between them and neither is able to reach across to make contact. The two have nothing in common and no contact. But, in an instant, they have everything in common. What they have in common overcomes all that is different between them. At the top of verse 22, the poor man dies – we knew he would, whether because of infection, malnutrition or sheer neglect. We imagine no one grieved his death or remembered his name, but Jesus does as he tells us from the start his name is Lazarus. Interestingly, the rich man is never given a name, something that shouldn't be overlooked in Jesus' storytelling. By the end of verse 22, the rich man dies, and we are reminded that the rich and poor are very different in life, very alike in death. End of Act 1.

Act 2 becomes a lot more interesting, because now the story takes us into the part of their life which we haven't seen or experienced. Walter Brueggeman asserts that the most important part begins now. The crucial element in their life, as Jesus suggests, is the part that remains unseen, and here we are permitted to see what we have not seen. Mind the gap, mind the gap. Jesus knows the Old Testament well and what theological options are open to him as a storyteller. He knows about Father Abraham, he knows about singing, "Rock-a my soul in the bosom of Abraham," he imagines an embracing, gentle old father waiting to embrace God's well-beloved children at death with no questions asked, no conditions or

qualifications to meet. Just come on home to comfort, warmth, and caring. He also knew about Moses who spoke using that humongous 2-letter word, "If." If you obey, you will come into the covenant. If you don't obey, duck, because you are gonna run into a heap a' trouble. Moses wasn't as gentle as Abraham, because the mountain was too severe and the exodus from slavery was too urgent. So nobody ever sang about "Rock-a my soul in the bosom of Moses." Moses was too harsh and cold and demanding.

So Jesus brings these old, tense memories into our story of the two dead men. Each dead man receives one dimension of the old faith. The poor man died first, the only time he did anything first in his life and he is assigned first to the bosom of Father Abraham, even though we would have thought that was reserved for the rich man. Lazarus is there, dirty, with open sores, but deeply loved in the welcoming embrace of Father Abraham. The rich man dies next and, of course, assumes he is headed for the same place. And then comes the 3rd Act. The rich man is stunned, thinking there must be a mistake. He is accustomed to better reservations, and now has been wrongly assigned to the annex. His request is modest – he asks for mercy. Remember that before he died, he wouldn't have asked for mercy because he never needed it, nor did he grant any. Now he asks a small thing, for Lazarus to give him cool water for his burning lips as he sits in the agony of the flames. The man without a name is accustomed to summoning the poor man who is always ready to serve, being a member of the pitiful "labor pool." However, Father Abraham knows better; he is firm with the rich man but not unkind. He calls the man "child," and admits they are related, albeit remotely. But then he tells him the truth, the new truth of his life in his changed circumstance, saying, "The truth is, you used up your quotas of good stuff, and you get no more. You used your advantage carelessly, you didn't pay attention, you didn't mind the gap, and now the gap can't be overcome. Failing to notice the gap in your lifetime makes the gap impermeable in death."

The rich man is a man of family values so he thinks of his brothers now; they should know the consequences of their actions. He says, "Send them Lazarus" to give them a wake-up call. He is still trying to get Lazarus to do his bidding. After all, the rich man only acted as he did because he didn't know any better. We've heard that one before, haven't we? He

goes on, “Unwarned, I did what everyone else was doing.” But Father Abraham isn’t so accommodating, for you see, messengers have already been sent, a long time ago. One was named Moses, others were prophets, and they should have been enough.

Jesus, that unnerving storyteller, gives us a zinger here – there is nothing to do with this story but to let it be like a flashing sign to pay attention; mind the gap, mind the gap for therein will be an opportunity to experience the glories around us if we pay attention and act. The realm of God shows up in the gap between the bearable, even pleasant, or luxurious living conditions of some and the unbearable, inhumane living conditions of others. God’s realm reveals itself when we clearly see that troublesome gap and move from seeing to active compassion before it is too late. I mentioned earlier that this story reflects the ancient belief that the righteous and the wicked can see each other after death. However, if they are attentive to the presence of the realm of God, they will also see each other before death. May it be so, Amen.