

CHASMS and CHANNELS: A Sermon by Dan Stern; BCUCC Sept. 30, 2007
(Update of Sept. 26, 2004) Luke 16: 19-31 – Rich Man & Lazarus

Washington State, and for that matter all of the American West, is a part of God's world chock full of dramatic geological wonders. Here glacier and water-formed chasms and channels abound. No hiker or kayaker can dare fail to be conscious of the places where it is impossible to get through or across, and also where an opportunity to get down, through, around, in, or under does afford itself. Chasms and channels matter! Can you imagine being the first human to arrive at the Grand Canyon's north or south face? Or even at the edge, before there was a bridge there, at Deception Pass on Whidbey Island?

Sam and I got a couple opening-night seats Friday for the new Shawn Penn-directed movie version of Jon Krakauer's biography *Into the Wild*. I'd already read and been profoundly shaken by the book. It's the story of a young, bright upper middle-class East Coast Ivy League college grad who gave up everything he had and distanced himself from everyone he knew to go West and 'live off the land'. Tutored on Tolstoy, Thoreau, and Jack London's writings, he is portrayed sympathetically as a mystic seeker on the ultimate road trip. Along the way, chasms and channels of all kinds are everywhere apparent. He kayaks the rapids of the Colorado River, going through culverts and irrigation canals all the way down into Mexico. He traverses a stream in the Alaskan wilderness that later becomes a raging river impossible for him to re-cross. Trapped, alone, and belatedly convinced that he'd made a terrible mistake to so separate himself from human caring and love, on the far side of that unbridgeable river in Alaska, he dies of starvation. It's a tragic, haunting story that makes me ponder things that matter too. Maybe when Jesus first told the rich man/poor man Lazarus parable, it had the same hair-raising effect on its intended audience that this movie had on me.

So what chasms divide us and what channels connect us, one to another, and in the end, to God, to forgiveness, and love? This morning, let's examine the stories of the Prophet Amos and of the poor man, Lazarus, attentive to ways divisive chasms form between us, in hopes of finding channels of flowing grace too often missed.

Chasms/channels: One of our newer church members, wanting to get to know the Bible better, asked me recently which parts were among my favorites. I mentioned liking and relating to the so-called 'minor prophet' named Amos. Amos was, after all, a rural farm boy who came to the big city. Kinda like me.

Trouble is, reading the book of Amos straight on and cold turkey without knowing much about the socioeconomic landscape he was critiquing is very unsettling. It may seem far too much like a judgmental rant. I'd actually had a good paraphrased version of Amos introduced to me several decades earlier: Peter Edigar's rewriting of it not only made it more palatable, it really made the prophet come alive for me.

The gist of Amos' story is this: (Christian Century's Paul Keim:) "When he left the farm and ventured north into Israel, business was booming there. Some people were certainly doing well, but it didn't seem to Amos that they were doing *right*. Amos saw an affluence (all around him) that had turned the hearts of the haves from the needs of the have-nots.

Sound familiar? Then as now, rich/poor chasms, unbridgeable gulfs where there ought to be channels for compassion and for justice.

It's said that there are more millionaires in the world today than ever before; which of course, doesn't say much, since a million dollars today is more like the \$10,000 of

yesterday. Actually, far less wealth is distributed widely nowadays than it was in the early post-World War II era. The majority of Hollywood movies too – from the 1930's until the 1970's made heroes of the noble poor, not of the selfish rich. Wealth really was more equally distributed. Not so of late. The rich and selfish have become our rock stars. Today, the once-vast American middle class is disappearing. Those wealthy enough to get the biggest tax breaks are still a very tiny portion of our society, only 1/10th of 1%. But those few get more all the time – they have and control the lion's share of the nation's wealth and the power it buys. Meanwhile, the formerly-powerful middle class gets all the time poorer, more numerous, and less powerful.

Just thinking about all this makes my blood boil, but somehow, it feels right and good and healthy to care about such things. I find I want to be in touch with the big picture, I want to pay attention to the real news, not just the celebrity gossip, I want to converse about real stuff in real time, I want to speak truth to power, and if I can, to make a prophetic witness, because to the extent that I do, I get in touch with the wonderful, powerful side of God who is no namby-pamby, and who speaks a firm rebuke to those who promote socioeconomic bullying and who consolidate horrendous greed. It feels *good* to get in touch with that side of God! Then I feel I'm approaching what appear to be impossible chasms and finding a way through: and that is what life, at its best, is about. Images of saffron-robed Buddhist monks praying in front of armed police in Burma come to mind; I'm amazed anew at what God-inspired human courage can accomplish. Amos speaks very aptly to such contemporary sociopolitical and economic realities. The wisdom of Amos interpreted through Edigar's lens decades ago seemed cathartic for me; it still does. Every true prophet, cuts channels through barriers, nonviolently doing something both powerful and holy in the world.

Jesus' parable from the Gospel of Luke is a cautionary tale too about an unbridgeable chasm. It's an oft-told classic. In Jesus' version, it's the rich guy who, for a change, remains nameless; and the poor man who has a name – Lazarus. The beggar Lazarus is, in fact, the only person in all of Jesus' parables, who is given a name! Just one more of Jesus' delightfully ironic reversals of what is commonly expected. It is the poor who are the unnamed and unnoticed ones in society. And at the end of the story when reversals of fortune really do come about, Lazarus is sitting in the lap of luxury. Just the opposite for the rich man. But notice this (G. Gallup): the rich man still tries to make Lazarus out to be his servant and errand boy! He's so long accustomed to his class privilege that he says, "God, have that boy fetch me some water, my tongue needs cooling." "Sorry," God replies, "The class system you nourished so effectively for your own sake has formed this huge chasm separating you. Lazarus couldn't comfort you now if he tried." "Well, at least send him to warn my friends and family back home." "But why would they listen to some bum claiming to be a dead man walking? They don't notice poor living ones like him any more than you did when you were alive, why would they know who he was or heed his counsel now?"

I hate to have to say it, but in some respects, things were actually better in Jesus' day. At least the rich man in the parable knew poverty existed; he knew Lazarus was a real person, he saw him at his own gate every day, he recognized his face and knew his name. The Lazarus's of today are far more out of sight and out of mind to the wealthy who live in gated communities. Like separate castles with moats and alligators, those inside may literally never see any people in need on the outside at all! Talk about unbridgeable chasms we ourselves form!

And then there's those who have been their rich masters' good little boys and girls, properly staying on their side of the chasm, maybe sitting in front of TV watching, "How to Marry a Millionaire". So many would-be millionaires out there fantasizing that they'll one day be the lucky one-tenth of one percent who are filthy rich, and get all the tax breaks! So it is that

we delude ourselves. "We humans have a highly-developed facility for delusion and denial. We imagine ourselves invincible, exceptional. We look for signs that the ease and comfort we have come to accept as either a birth right or as a reward for virtuous suffering will be ours forever. ..." (Keim) And sometimes, we who are poor vote directly against our own best interest, rooting for the guy who gives tax breaks to the wealthiest of the wealthy because by God, one day I'm going to BE one of those guys, don't you know! In truth, it's as impossible for most people in the world to end up marrying a millionaire as it is to win the lottery! We're almost never an exception, we're almost always, the rule. The house is rigged; the odds are stacked against us.

Lost in our fantasy worlds, we never notice Lazarus, do we? In the end though, he's the one who matters.

Meanwhile: "What's wrong with sleeping on a nice bed at night?" you might ask. Is indulgence in the occasional rack of lamb or veal cutlet such a sin? What's so bad about playing edifying music while sipping a little wine? Or taking long, hot showers?

"There is nothing whatsoever inherently wrong with ease, comfort, and security. These are all well and good things. But when the pursuit or maintenance of transient material goals is at the center of our universe, everything goes array.

"The problem with those at ease in Zion, according to Amos, was that their comfort had robbed them of their capacity for empathy. We forget that another's loss is our loss: it should hurt like hell when someone else is hurting. If it doesn't, then something inside of us has died."

"When Albert Schweitzer first heard the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, the conversion that changed his whole life began. From that point on he understood that the Europe of his day was the Rich Man, and that Beggar Africa was starving at his doorstep. So he went off to a hospital (in Africa), and for the rest of his life, he tended the running sores of poverty and oppression, and served the risen One...Today, for we North Americans too...Lazarus is not only an individual downtown selling Streetwise, he's 2/3 of the world's population! We have a Lazarus at our gate in Latin America, another Lazarus down the road in the Arab Middle East. We're trying to build walls and dig chasms. He's warning our me-first world to mend our ways.

The chasms are already so very deep and wide. We won't be able to get around them in the future, we gotta cross over that bridge now, gotta tune into those channels, gotta come in through the door we know by name as Jesus.

Christ, in and through our neighbors in need, is waiting at our door. Now's our big chance. Open up that door; come on in through that channel; and pay attention while we still can. God wills it that we all be One. Let it so be.