

A Chasm of Our Own Making
Luke 16:18-31
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Preached Sunday, September 30 at San Jose, Costa Rica

I've always admired the art of cemeteries. In addition to all the history found in local cemeteries, there is much to captivate the eye: the orderliness of the place, the landscaping, the flowers carefully placed on the graves of loved ones, the intricate carvings of the headstones. But what grabs my attention more than those things are the headstones themselves, especially the monumental ones, not so much the mausoleums, but the really big monolithic ones that tower above all the rest. I have joked to Flora that I want one of these really huge chunks of granite placed over me when my time comes, and she tells me that if I don't shut up about this my time will come sooner than I think, and we have a good laugh about it, but if I am honest, I'm really only half joking, because even though it is the height of vanity (in more ways than one!), there is something about those monuments that attracts me. There is of course, the matter of cost, which will save me from looking vain to all who come after me, for it takes a great deal of money to erect several tons of carved stone, but if this sermon survives somewhere on the Internet, my secret will be out...

I have a feeling that my covert desire for a huge monument may be just one more thing I have in common with the rich man in today's parable from Luke. We hear that the rich man, often given the name "Dives" in older translations, was

buried after he died, but we do not hear about the size of his tombstone. But like Dives, I too have a gate to which the poor come seeking food, and I have been known, upon occasion, to wear purple and linen, and I do like a good meal. I have visited the global richlist website and know that I am among the top 4% of the world's wealthy, as Dives probably was in his time as well. We have far too much in common, Dives and me, to dismiss this parable casually. It would be nice to believe that since Dives is a figment of Jesus' imagination, being simply a character in a parable, he is not real, but all I have to do is look in the mirror to discover that he lives and breathes.

Jesus offers us some wonderful details in the parable, and a lot of echoes of other Biblical passages: the dogs licking away at the sores of Lazarus, the angels carrying him away like the prophet Elijah, the reversal of fortune that is so typical of Jesus' message. The detail, however, which provokes me the most is the image of the chasm that in death is finally now visible to Dives, but which, in life, Lazarus experienced everyday. In life, the threshold of the gate to Dives' home was as enormous as the chasm which in Hades separates the two, even if the rich man could not see it. In life, as in death, on one side of the chasm was comfort and on the other was torment. The chasm was not a new thing for these two men, only their positions on either side. Jesus chooses his words wisely telling this parable, putting in the passive voice the excavation of the chasm: "Besides all this," he says, "between you and us a great chasm *has been fixed*, so that those who might

want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.” Indeed, “a great chasm has been fixed,” but Jesus carefully leaves the identity of the creator of the chasm undisclosed, lest we assume too quickly it is God. As a teenager, I had a boss who was quite skilled in the use of silence to obtain the confession he sought for the guilt he had discovered. He would ask a simple question and then just wait us out in silence until we came clean. And it is what remains unsaid about the chasm that provokes us to think about who could have dug such a thing, and with that reflection, the realization that it was neither God nor Lazarus.

With that in mind, the character of Dives gives new meaning to the old saying, “He was digging his own grave.” You see, with every sumptuous meal unshared with Lazarus, and with every piece of fine, new linen and purple cloth he put on himself instead of Lazarus’s sores, he was enlarging the chasm that separated him from Lazarus. Imagine the entrance to Dives’ home, and the space between his outer gate and his inner door. For a while, the excavation was one he could simply jump over, like an inconveniently placed mudpuddle. But instead of filling it in, and leveling it off, he continued to dig until he had to call upon his servants to help him across, by carrying him on their backs. Towards the end, it would have taken him a lot longer to make it down one side and back up the other, but it was still crossable. But by the time he has made it to Hades, it is so large as to be uncrossable, like an inverted monument to his lack of compassion and justice

and grace, and he becomes trapped. You see, the raw material for our tombstones has to come from somewhere, and so the larger our monument, the bigger our chasm. In fact, the size of Dives' chasm was probably just about the same size as the monument over his gravesite.

You see, I am not the only one who thinks about monuments, about how I will be remembered. We all do that, in one form or another. What about me will linger on this planet that will mark my time here? Will I just be a quickly forgotten memory, not even a footnote in history? Or will what I have been and done live on after me? The form of our monuments differs, of course, with some creating tombstones or buildings or words, others creating people, still others creating emotional legacies. Each monument has a cost, not only to the builder but to the whole world, and each monument takes our energy to build. You and I live in the shadows of such monuments, the life's work of people determined, consciously or unconsciously, to erect something permanent by which they will be remembered.

Now you might be wondering what it takes to create a monument the size of an uncrossable chasm, in life, or in death. Of course, it takes the right kinds of tools, picks and shovels and the like, but it also takes help, and for that we usually call in the Ance Brothers, Ignor and Arrog, to do the hard labor while we are dining and dressing ourselves. After all, people like Dives never do their own work. And so Ignorance, whose real first name is Willful, is the one who makes sure we don't let the suffering of people like Lazarus deter us from our monument

building. Willful Ignorance builds walls which keep the Lazaruses of the world from our sight. If we don't see them, they don't exist, right? And so, willful ignorance allows us to remain in denial about the realities of life just outside the entrances to our homes. Willful ignorance raises the smallest of concerns to the level of absolute necessity, so that we can keep ourselves occupied with trivial concerns instead of the weightier matters of the law. Will I go to Iceland this year, or Paris? Should I buy the Lexus or the Mercedes? Ignorance truly is bliss; just ask Dives.

The other Ance brother, Arrog, keeps us motivated by continually reminding us that we really are better than the Lazaruses of the world and that he or she who dies with the largest monument wins. Arrogance is the one who convinces us that the Law and the Prophets don't apply to us, that Lazarus deserves what he gets, that even in death, and from his new position at the banquet table, Lazarus should get up and serve us by bringing water to cool our burning tongues. Arrogance is always looking around to see who is building a bigger monument and immediately reports back to us so we can call in more workers.

This parable follows immediately upon other teachings in which Jesus addresses the issue of wealth in discipleship. Most pointedly, he tells the disciples that they face a choice between serving God or Mammon, the word "mammon" meaning "the thing in which you put your trust," in other words, things of the world which provide for our security like money and wealth. It is as if God places

a shovel in each of our hands and tells us to go, dig, and build something, and we face the choice between building a monument to our own deaths, or a testament to God's life in us through Jesus Christ. One will be visible only in death, and only when people choose to stroll through the very particular place we have built our monument. The other will be visible wherever we are throughout our lives as we minister to the Lazaruses in our midst.

If the Ance Brothers are the workers for those who are building monuments to themselves, who is available to help we who would build testaments to God? Let me suggest we call in the Ity Sisters, also known as Humility, Generosity, and Authenticity. They are the greatest builders of things that truly matter in the history of the world. They are the ones who help us fill in chasms instead of creating them. They are the ones who teach us to share our meals and to use our own garments to bind up open sores and to take water to cool the burning tongues of others. These sisters help us to overcome our needs to see monuments erected in our own honor, whether those monuments be careers, or cars, or children. They guide us to places of beauty and not just busyness, and compassion rather than competition.

Friends, the purpose of the parable, then and now, is to put to its hearers the question: "How deep is your chasm getting?" and to remind them that the shovel in their hands can be used to build both monuments and testaments. May God help us to be a testament building people, for Lazarus' sake. Amen.