

Proper 21C-25 Sermon
Sept. 28, 2025
Trinity Episcopal Church
The Rev. Sarah D. Thomas

How many of you have seen or read Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*? It's one of the most beloved and transformational stories ever written. The story of Ebenezer Scrooge, a man so hardened by his love of money, that it's all he cares about. His greed turns him into a mean selfish person with no compassion for anyone. One night, he is visited by three ghosts who reveal truths to him about his life, in an attempt to warn him what will come if he doesn't change his ways.

When the Ghost of Christmas Future visits Scrooge, the scariest of all the ghosts, he is shown scenes from the future. In the first scene, we see three men laughing about a funeral about to take place. They are making fun of the man who died, saying no one will attend his funeral because he is so despised. Then we see a poor family feeling relieved at the man's death. They owed him money and faced eviction. And his death meant their already hard life would be a bit easier. Then, we see the Cratchett family grieving the death of Tiny Tim, a heartbreaking scene. Tiny Tim is the young son of Scrooge's employee, Bob Cratchett. Little Tim has struggled with health problems but his family can't afford to get the help he needs. Scrooge has so much money he could have helped. But in this scene of the future, the little boy has died. And finally, the graveyard scene, that reveals the identity of the dead man: Ebenezer Scrooge, etched on the tomb stone. Well, this certainly wakes Scrooge up. The visits of the three ghosts, showing to him with new eyes the impact of his ways, transform him and just when he fears it is too late, he is given one more chance. He wakes up on Christmas morning, a man repentant and changed, liberated from greed, giddy with the chance to live his remaining days differently.

Today's parable is similar to *A Christmas Carol*¹, in that Jesus is using a dramatic story to wake up and warn his listeners. He is addressing the Pharisees, whom the text calls "lovers of money." Even though the parable depicts a scene of heaven and hell, it likely isn't meant to be a depiction of what the afterlife is like. It's not about the afterlife at all. Many scholars believe Jesus is borrowing from a common folktale of the time to make his point — that how we are in *this* life matters.

In this Ghost-of-Christmas-Future Jesus Parable, an extravagantly wealthy man loves money and his luxurious lifestyle more than anyone or anything else. There is a poor man who sleeps at his gate every day named Lazarus. (Mind you, this is a different Lazarus than the other one in the New Testament, whom Jesus brings back to life. This is a different guy). Anyway, both men die and the rich man ends up in Hades, and the poor man, Lazarus, ends up in heaven in the bosom of Abraham. The rich man begs for a second chance, but he is denied that.

This is a difficult parable because its message is so clear: those who hoard wealth and ignore the needs of the poor do so at their spiritual peril. Beyond just individuals, the rich man also

¹ Thanks to Lutheran pastor Paul Neuchterlein for the suggestion to use *A Christmas Carol* when preaching about this parable.

represents the collective – the nations that are so rich, so full of extraction and consumption that they exploit and harm and ignore the Lazarus's at their doorstep.

The haunting image at the center of this parable is a chasm – a giant, impassable, permanent chasm.

Abraham says to Lazarus, "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." A pretty terrifying image. This chasm is not created by God, though. It is human-made alienation and the resulting suffering. The impassable chasm in the afterlife is simply a mirror of the chasm the rich man wouldn't cross when he was alive. And it begs the question: What are the chasms of today? Obviously, the chasm between rich and poor, which has only grown. The American political chasm comes to mind, and even the chasm within Christianity itself. The chasms seem so great. It's overwhelming.

The word we are hearing thrown around a lot right now is "They." We all do this. "They" is a chasm word, echoing off the dividing walls. "The left." "The right." These, too, are chasm words, especially when used as the subject in a sentence. Any time we lump large groups of strangers into disembodied ideological categories, the chasm deepens and widens. It's as if a chasm consciousness has taken over our psyches and is perpetuated by the media. And political leaders use this against us. Chasm consciousness tells us that people fit into rigid ideological categories. It gives us something to blame. It tells us that it is too big and too late so why even try.

Richard Rohr talks about this in his new book *The Tears of Things*. He says the thing that bridges the chasm is seeing that right below our outrage is a deep sadness, a sadness that we all feel on both sides of the chasm. But when we can sink below the outrage, and allow ourselves to lament the state of the world together, the tears come. And the chasm narrows. A bridge appears.

We saw this for a split second in Erika Kirk's speech at her husband Charlie Kirk's memorial service last week. Through tears and in front of thousands of people, she forgave her dead husband's killer. She spoke about the gospel call of love and forgiveness, instead of retaliation. And she received a standing ovation, because human hearts respond to radical gospel love. And even though the speeches that followed hers were shockingly different in tone, her words created a brief bridge, a moment when the chasm suddenly narrowed, uniting us in our collective grief for the state of our politics and our country. Her speech complicated assumptions. It messed with chasm consciousness. And she allowed us to all just be human for a moment. And a few days later, when comedian Jimmy Kimmel was put back on the air, the same thing happened. His tearful words of grief that he unintentionally hurt people; that he, too, mourned the murder of a young man; tears creating a brief bridge across the chasm. His grief complicated our chasm consciousness. Jesus was a chasm crosser. He spent his life bridging chasms of injustice and suffering and he is our guide for these days.

Listen to this passage from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. He was talking about the chasm at the time between Jews and Gentiles and the law of circumcision and belonging. But it's worth hearing today:

“For [Christ Jesus] is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.” (Ephesians 2:14-16)

This letter was written centuries ago. I guess we will always be a tribal people. But Jesus is still the way. He is a chasm crosser, and he asks us to do the same. It’s hard. Even when we have a bridge moment, the next moment the chasm seems impassable again, especially when the chasms we face are so out of our control.

But Jesus acted locally. It was all he could do. And it was more than enough. And you could say the same thing about Ebenezer Scrooge. When he woke up on Christmas morning, giddy with a second chance at life, the first thing he did was buy the poor Cratchett family a Christmas turkey.

He generously tipped the boy who delivered it. He showed up for dinner at his estranged nephew’s house. He raised the salary of his over-worked employee and gave him extra money to help with Tiny Tim’s medical care. He cried out Merry Christmas to everyone he passed on the street. And he had a great time doing it.

I wonder what chasms we might feel called to cross each day? Even small ones make a huge difference and they help us see that the chasms are not anywhere near as gaping wide as they seem. Each little bridge we attempt keeps that chasm consciousness at bay and is an act of resistance. When Scrooge wakes up on Christmas morning, he says, “I’m here!” We are *here*, not in the ghost of Christmas future world. And in the words of Tiny Tim, that we need now more than ever:

“God bless us. God bless us, everyone.”