16th Sunday after Pentecost

Amos 6:1-7, Ps. 146 1Tim. 6:6-19 Lk. 16:19-31

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church Sept. 28, 2025

"The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in agony in these flames.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he in comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, 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."

Like all the texts appointed for this morning, this is a text, a story, about money and about the dangers of wealth… But even more-so it is a story about "chasms"… The chasm between the "rich-man-in-Hades" and "Lazarus-in-heaven" after they had both died, yes… But other chasms as well if we take time to look at the story carefully…

Luke tells us in this story that during his life the rich man dressed in purple, the color of royalty and privilege, and that at his gate lay poor Lazarus, hungry and covered with sores. The fact that Lazarus lay at his

gate meant the rich man had to practically step over Lazarus every time he went in or out of his gate… And yet he seemed not to see him…

In large part because the rich man had fixed a chasm between himself and Lazarus which prevented him from knowing any relationship between them except for that of "somebody" and "nobody"… a relationship of imbalance and dehumanization… a relationship devoid of compassion or care that continued even after death, as even in Hades the rich man asked Abraham to send Lazarus on two errands; one to dip the tip of his fingers in water to cool the rich man's tongue, and the other to go warn his brothers about what might befall them if they didn't start paying attention to the poor at their gates…

The rich man's request continuing after death the chasm he had made during his lifetime between himself and those not of his own social standing… a chasm that blinded him to the humanity of those he deemed "other," casting all his relationships in categories of "worthy" and "unworthy," "master" and "servant," "human" and "less-then-human," and holding him in bondage to the small little Scrooge-like world of "me, me, me"…

And creating thereby a chasm not only between himself and the Lazaruses in his life, but also between himself and the God he professed to worship, honor, serve and live in relationship with… A relationship Luke makes clear when Abraham calls the rich man "child"… indicating that the rich man considered himself to be a "child of Abraham." But, as Luke makes clear, a "child of Abraham" in name only, as his life reflected none of the characteristics such an identity marker would assume…

Which would be a life lived in covenantal relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob… The creator, redeemer, liberator God, who, as the prophets of Israel made abundantly clear, called all those who professed God's name to be about the same things as God was… namely **creating** life in the midst of death, **redeeming**, reconciling and and healing what is broken, cast-off, and deemed by the world to be "unredeemable," and **seeking to liberate** those held in bondage to poverty, marginalization, prejudice, and the systemic forces of greed, power-mongering, injustice, scapegoating, hatred and violence…

Both the prophets and Luke giving literary voice to an understanding of humankind's relationship with God affirmed visually centuries later by a fourth century Christian dessert father who held up a wagon wheel as a symbol of the Divine-human relationship saying this by way of explanation…

"It's like this," he said… "Let's imagine that the center of the wheel represents God… And that the spokes of the wheel represent people… Notice how the farther out we get from the center, from God, the farther we are from others… from one another… And visa-versa, the closer we come to one another, the closer we are to God…"

The chasm the rich man had made between himself and Lazarus was an indication of the chasm he had made between himself and God… And oh how helpful it might have been for him if he could have come to see the wisdom of a little description of the difference between heaven and hell… A description that says, "Imagine for a moment that people have no way to bend their arms, but need always to keep them straight… Now imagine they are hungry… Well, hell is that place where everyone is trying desperately to feed themselves, but are

not able to because they can't get the food to their mouths… And heaven is that place where they feed one another."

The chasm the rich man made between himself and Lazarus (between himself and those he deemed "other"), prevented him from knowing (from experiencing) the presence of love, which is the presence of God, which is the essence of heaven… Meaning the chasm in the story between Hades and Heaven was not a chasm fixed by God, but by the rich man himself…

Which is perhaps, what the great Swedish theologian Gustav Aulen meant when he said, *"To be confronted by Divine love involves a judgment… That the judgment of God is a judgment of love means that no one will be rejected and separated except those who have refused to tolerate the presence of love."*

The rich man in our Gospel text for this morning refused to tolerate the presence of love… both the giving and the receiving of it, creating a chasm between himself and others, between himself and God…

And, I want to suggest, between himself and something so much harder to describe or put into words… Which is why, this morning, in an effort to speak of what this "something" is, I will go by way of a word of wisdom offered by a young writer named Megan Falley shortly after the death of her beloved partner Andrea Gibson…

A word of wisdom she shares in an essay entitled "Don't Skip the Sadness," in which Megan speaks about the well-meaning people who, in the aftermath of a death, try to encourage the grieving one to move as quickly as possible through the devastation of the loss into a brighter happier frame of mind…

In response to such "up-beat encouragement," Megan makes reference in her essay to the movie "Titanic" (which, you may remember ends with the sinking of the ship as the musicians take their places on the deck to play their music… music sounding in the bitter cold night, even as the ship is going down…)

Megan Falley writes, *"In the late 90s, when I got "Titanic" on VHS, it was so long it came in two tapes. The first tape could almost pass for a romance-comedy: two different people from different worlds meet on a majestic ship. If you wanted to, you could end there. End on a kiss.*

But the second tape is inevitable – the ending we all knew from the beginning. The infamous sinking. Whether we watch it or not, it happens. The iceberg is already in the water.

It's all going to end. That's what makes it beautiful. Don't skip the sadness. Don't leave the theatre. Keep your eyes open. Keep your heart open. It's all going down anyway. Listen for the violins."

So what I want to suggest is that the rich man in our Gospel text for this morning, caught up as he was in the false supports of wealth, privilege and power, made a chasm between his outer or "false" self and his inner or "authentic" self…

- The authentic self being the self that dares acknowledge the tenuous, vulnerable, broken, and wounded nature of this human life…
- The self that dares cross the chasms that divide one from another…

- The self that dares enter the darkness of unknowing without all the protective layers of status, success, wealth, and certainty, and there, without skipping the sadness, without leaving the theater, with eyes and heart open, even in the inevitability of loss and grief, listens for the violins… perhaps even joins the violins, even as the ship is going down…

And in the complete and utter vulnerability of such a time and place, recognizes a truth about the music that is perceptible when there is nothing else to hold onto… A truth about the love that moves in the dark, waiting for those who are empty enough of their false selves to hear it… to see it… to be it for others… with no between between them…

I'm not sure Luke had this chasm between the "false self" and the "authentic self" in mind when he told the story about the rich man and Lazarus… Because of course, Luke's main concern, just like the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures, was the chasm between rich and poor, powerful and powerless, top-dog and under-dog…

But I can only say that in my life it is the chasm between my false self and my authentic self that is the most problematic – the false self so carefully layered with protective coverings of my own making, I can barely remember my authentic self (the self God longs for me to be), much less begin to cross the chasms I have made between myself and others… myself and God…

Which is why perhaps, in these months of grief following my husband Michael's sudden death, I find myself returning again and again to a place where I sense there is something for me to hear, to

know, to take in, in this life-long venture to live from my authentic self… my vulnerable and broken open self….

Again and again, I find myself coming into this space when the building is quiet… and standing here… in this very place where Michael and I would receive the Eucharist together, or I would place the bread into his open hand… saying either the Episcopal words, "the body of Christ, the bread of heaven," or the Lutheran words, "the body of Christ, broken for you"… The last time I did so, as it turns out, being just ten days before Michael died…

I stand here… And I think to myself, "This is the God who crosses every chasm… Even the chasms of our own making that divide us from God, from one another and from our truest selves… This is the God who crosses even the chasm of death… the God who, through the body of Jesus, broken and shared, tells us of a love so fierce and tender, so deep and true, it brings heaven into our midst… the "other world" into our midst, where there is no between between us and God, between you and me, between us and the world out there, between us and the ones we have loved and thought we had lost…

"It is all a thin place," God says in the bread and wine, and in a thousand thousand other ways… "And the love that holds it all is as close to you as the air you breathe… So let go of the purple robes, the status symbols, and the gold good conduct stars upon which you so successfully build your life…

"Acknowledge the fragility of it all… the tenuous and beautiful gift of it all… Acknowledge your vulnerability… *Don't skip the sadness. Don't leave the theatre. Keep your eyes open. Keep your heart open. And even when it feels like it's all going down, listen for the violins."*

It is from this place, the place where our hearts are broken open and we glimpse our authentic selves (the selves God longs for us to be), that we have a chance of seeing God and Lazarus, seeing our neighbors, our enemies… and even ourselves as intimately related… All of creation part of the constellation of connection we call love…

And it is from this place that there is a chance that we might actually not only reach out to Lazarus with the gifts of care and compassion, but we might sense that Lazarus has gifts to give us as well… melodies he might play on his violin, wrought from his deepest heart, that help us to hear our own…

It is all a thin place, dear brothers and sisters in Christ… No chasms between ourselves and God, between ourselves and one another, between our false selves and our true selves, between ourselves and those we have loved and thought we had lost to death… Because love surrounds and fills all of creation… because love calls and claims each of us by name, there are no chasms except those we ourselves create…

And because this is true, we can dare to stay with the sadness. We can dare to stay in the theater until the movie is over. We can dare to keep our eyes and our hearts open, trusting that even when it feels like it's all going down, love is still on the move… We can dare to listen for the violins…

And when we have heard them… when we have taken the music into ourselves and know it deep in our hearts, we can dare to draw the

bow over the strings ourselves, in the name and in the way of Jesus, who teaches us how…