

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Proper 21-C; 29 September 2019
St. Thomas, Glassboro – Todd Foster
(rev. 201909280830)

Who fixed the chasm?

In nomine...

I. Intro

There are certain moments that seem mundane and normal at the time, but stick out even in distant memory and stay with you. One of those moments for me was when I was in High School. I was taking AP Calculus. I was struggling with it: it was not an easy class. So I reached out for help in a way that made sense to me. My father was in the midst of his career as an engineer: math was a key tool of his daily trade. My mother was a math teacher with a graduate degree not in teaching but in straight math. She would know this stuff cold. But that evening, as I sat at the dining table struggling with my homework, it turned out that neither of my parents could help me. They had forgotten the concepts that I was now expected to learn. I turned back to my book in desperation. I was disappointed my parents couldn't help me. I hoped that someday I would be able to help my own children with this stuff.

Can you guess what I'm going to say next?

This year Aviva is taking AP Calculus. She's the same age I was when I took it. And it was in, I think, the second week of school – just this month! – that she asked for some help. It wasn't even anything advanced like specialized Integrals: her class was still working on the review chapters from *last year's* pre-calc class. But when I sat down with her to look at her problem... I had nothing to offer. It was tragic. My vain dreams of omni-competence were, once again, shattered.

II. Thesis

As frequently happens, we have some awesome passages of Scripture to choose from this week. Jeremiah does this crazy thing, buying property in the middle of a war zone, signifying God's promise of a future.

Paul in 1st Timothy has a lot to say about contentment and money, the love of money and what to do with it if you're rich. We could spend weeks and weeks on that dozen or so verses.

But Jesus follows up last week's parable of the Crafty Steward with another one: the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. The rich man lives in his rich home, enjoying life. Lazarus is a poor man, pitiable in every way, wishing to eat from the rich man's compost. But the rich man has built a wall, excluding Lazarus on the outside. So Lazarus doesn't get to eat, even from the garbage. When both these men die, Jesus tells a story about the after-life. He speaks of Lazarus in heaven. Abraham was the quintessence of a person who was on the right side of God, so to be with Abraham meant you were in paradise. The rich man is separated from Lazarus and Abraham by a great chasm, existing apart from them in a place of torment. And the really interesting question to me is, who fixed that chasm there? That sounds cruel and awful and hopeless!

The rich man begs for help, then begs on behalf of his rich family. But Abraham maintains that if they have ignored "Moses and the prophets," which is another of saying "the Bible," then they're not going to listen to anyone, even someone who rises from the dead.

So here's the thing. When I took calculus, I was slow to understand its practical import. Calculus is not some arbitrary, arcane set of ideas and operations designed to test who's good enough to achieve a certain status. Calculus, instead, is a tool for describing and understanding the real world in all its complexity. Calculus brings into focus certain ideas and certain measurements that we might not otherwise grasp right off, and it enables us to interact with the world around us in a more informed, effective way.

Sometimes when we read the Bible, Moses and the prophets and, as Christians, the apostles and the letters, we sometimes read it the way the rich man does. Sometimes we perceive God's word as an arbitrary, arcane set of ideas and operations designed to test who is good enough to achieve a certain status. A religion with a vague and far-off end. But God's word, instead, is a

path into describing and understanding the real world in all its complexity. God's word brings into focus certain ideas and certain ways of being that we might not otherwise comprehend right off, enabling us to live in a more informed, effective way. God's word leads us into an eternal kind of life, a life rooted in our belonging to God's Kingdom rather than to any other lesser reality.

In Jesus' parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, the rich man was, ostensibly, familiar with the Bible. But he had not really understood it. That's the only way he would have built a wall around his house to keep Lazarus out. Because what the Bible teaches us is that the things we do now have eternal implications. We are shaping ourselves and our realities for all eternity. As that rich man built that wall around his house, and then refused to open his gate to share his table scraps with Lazarus, he was building a chasm that would separate him from Lazarus forever.

Maybe this parable was the inspiration for Dickens' *Christmas Carol*. Isn't it telling the same story? Scrooge was forging a chain he experienced even in the present in the form of broken relationships and loneliness, but he wouldn't understand clearly what he'd done until after he had died. Until someone did come back from the dead to warn him. Dickens was looking for a happier ending to the story!

III. Good News

The Good News is that someone did rise from the dead to warn us! A startling thing happened at the Resurrection of Jesus, and that event serves as an invitation to us. Always it's an invitation: we get to make our own choices. God doesn't force us to do anything. God does not threaten or cajole. We can continue building walls in the present, stockpiling riches, looking out for ourselves and our comfort first of all, and playing the game of consumption and acquisition. But the fact of the matter is that in doing so we are building chasms, separating ourselves from the Kingdom of God ethic proclaimed by Moses and prophets, Jesus and the apostles.

The alternative is to embrace God's invitation, even and especially when the instructions are non-obvious. Like Calculus the first time you try your hand at it, we can't all expect to be experts without putting in the hard work of learning and practice.

IV. Invitation

Also like Calculus, living in the Kingdom of God is a use-it-or-lose-it proposition. For most of us, the Kingdom of God ethic is not our natural response to the vicissitudes of life. That's why we gather as church, that's why we practice daily prayer, that's why we spend time together in order to encourage one another in our practices of discipleship and spiritual growth.

This invitation of Jesus extends to you even today. Some things are OK to let go of. While my life might be better if I still practiced my calculus, that's not a priority for me right now. Learning to love, learning to pray, learning to dwell continually in God's presence: these are the things I experience as more important, more critical, more worth learning and developing every day.

Fortunately, God doesn't demand omni-competence from you or me. God doesn't demand anything at all. God invites us to love and to be loved, and to grow in the ways that that love leads us. Instead of chasms, we'll be building bridges. Then life, even when it ends, will only be a doorway to something better.

FIN