

“Jumping the Chasm” GPPC 9-25-16
Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16, Luke 16:19-31

When I was a kid for a time we used to ride around on bicycles that only had one gear. And you stopped the bike not with handbrakes but by peddling backward to make the back wheel lock up. I know this is hard to believe, but it's true. We called them stingray bikes. They had a slightly smaller front tire and a larger back tire and handlebars that came up and then jutted to the sides. Sometimes there were even little plastic streamers that hung out of the handgrips and fluttered in the breeze. Meanwhile the bicycle seat was long and known as a banana seat. And for helmets? Oh, please. Nobody wore helmets. But we were also idiots who are lucky to be alive today. So you kids out there *do* have to wear your helmets.

There were two things great about those stingray bikes. One, you could roar down the street, and throw on the brake while turning the handlebars slightly and make an impressive skid-mark on the road. Sometimes you could even skid to within inches of one of a friend's feet. Not that I would ever do such an inconsiderate thing.

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Second, these bikes were great for ramps. You could find naturally occurring ramps wherever there might be mounds of South Carolina clay at a housebuilding worksite or in the woods. We also built ramps from scrap plywood. Either way, you'd go to the top of the hill. Peddle down the hill as hard as you could and just as you hit the end of the ramp sort of pull back on the handlebars, fly through the air, land safely, and keep repeating the process until you were bored or had a truly outstanding wreck. It was awesome, and I'm pretty sure all the neighborhood girls were duly impressed. And you were, weren't you?

Part of our inspiration for these flights came from a man named Evel Knievel. Some of you are too young to remember him. But Evel Knievel was a stunt motorcyclist prominent in the 1960s and 70s. During his career he was famous for attempting more than 75 ramp to ramp jumps on his motorcycle over such items as cars, buses, wild animals, sharks. I did say attempt, because he had quite a few spectacular crashes, including ones where he broke a lot of bones. Near the end of his career, Knievel tried to jump over the Snake River Canyon

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basically with a rocket-powered motorcycle. But his parachute deployed too soon and he landed short of his goal. The chasm was awfully wide.

Jesus says once upon a time there was this rich man. How rich was he? Well, he dressed in purple, (a color reserved for emperors of the time) and fine linen (the fanciest pantsy-est underwear available--I think he bought it at "Victor's Secret"). And he feasted sumptuously, not just occasionally, say when there was a church potluck, *but every single day*. This rich man is not named, but we can picture him, can't we? He looked like an escapee king from "Game of Thrones" or maybe "Ben Hur." He'd sit on his throne and, between burps, he'd snap his fingers, and boss his underlings around. "Knave, fetch me my robe! Wench, bring me more wine, and be quick about it!" Quite the charmer.

Meanwhile, says Jesus, just outside the man's gated community, right at the entrance, lay a poor man named Lazarus. He was covered with sores. And the dogs, considered unclean at the time, would come and lick his nasty sores. And Lazarus was so hungry he just wanted to eat whatever scraps and crumbs fell off the rich's man's table. But the rich man gave him nothing.

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Well, as luck or providence would have it, the rich man and the poor man died on the same day. And as we've been learning in the Luke Bible study on Tuesdays, one of Luke's favorite themes is "divine reversal." So here is where the men's stories went in opposite directions.

Lazarus was flown by the angels to paradise to enjoy bliss in the company of Abraham. Let the good times roll, baby!

But the rich man was buried and then went to Hades. And what do we know about Hades? The word is probably a translation of the Hebrew word *sheol*. Sheol was originally thought to be a place where all people went after death. It referred to a location and a state of being that was shadowy and forgetful. But later, under influence from Persian religions, gradually the notion developed that there would be a place for the godly and a separate place for the ungodly.

What do we believe these days? Some Christians think there's a place of punishment, eternal separation from God for the ungodly—hades or hell. But others, including me, believe and live in hope that God will finally bring all God's children home, even the most sinful of them. My favorite theologian says this, "The image of the end-time 'fire'

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has nothing to do with the stake or with the apocalyptic destruction of the world through fire. It is an image for God's love, which burns away everything which is contrary to God, so that the person whom God has created will be saved." (Jürgen Moltmann, *Sun of Righteousness, Arise!*, 137.)

We Christians, imperfect followers of Jesus, believe that by God's grace in Jesus Christ we need not fear death and hades, because Christ is Lord over death and hades. And we believe the content of our lives will be judged not harshly but graciously through the eyes of our Lord and Savior. So instead of trying to be obedient to God out of fear of some sort of divine retribution, we try to be obedient to God out of gratitude and because we want to be a part of God's love in the world. That's what we believe, isn't it?

But in the story Jesus told the rich man went to Hades and was tormented in the flames. There was a great chasm between Abraham and Lazarus and the rich man. So the rich man, still giving orders, yelled, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me. Send Lazarus to dip his finger in the water and cool my tongue." But Abraham said, "Too bad. You had

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good things in your lifetime and Lazarus had evil. Now the tables are turned. There's a great chasm—no crossing it.”

So the rich man tried one last time. “How about my five brothers? Can you at least warn them?” “Nope,” said Abraham, “They've read the Bible, Moses and the prophets. They know what's expected of human beings. If they won't listen to Moses and the prophets, they won't even listen if somebody rises from the dead.” And the story ends with a great big sad thud.

Or does it?

I don't think so, for at least three reasons. First, the story is a comfort for poor people. It says you're not going to be poor forever. You're not going to keep wondering where you and your family's next meal is coming from. You're not going to spend eternity trying to figure out whether to eat or pay the electric bill. You're not going feel ashamed that your children don't have decent clothes, strong schools, and safe neighborhoods. Your poverty will end in this life or it will end in the next life, but it's going to end.

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Second, as *New York Times* columnist Nicolas Kristoff reported this week, most people don't realize this, but we are actually making tremendous progress in alleviating poverty worldwide. He says, "The number of people living in extreme poverty (\$1.90 per person per day) has tumbled by half in two decades, and the number of small children dying has dropped by a similar proportion—that's six million lives a year saved by vaccines, breast-feeding promotion, pneumonia medicine and diarrhea treatments! Historians may conclude that the most important thing going on in the world in the early 21st century was a stunning decline in human suffering.

[He continues] "As recently as 1981...44 percent of the world's population lived in extreme poverty...now the share is believed to be less than 10 percent and falling.

"For the entire history of the human species until the 1960s, a majority of adults were illiterate. Now 85 percent of adults worldwide are literate and the share is rising...

"The U.N. aims to eradicate extreme poverty by 2030, and experts believe it is possible to get quite close. In short, on our watch, we have a

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decent chance of virtually wiping out ills that have plagued humanity for thousands of generations, from illiteracy to the most devastating kind of hand-to-mouth poverty. . .

[Finally, he says] “Cynics scoff that if more children’s lives are saved, they will just grow up to have more babies and cause new famines and cycles of poverty. Not so! In fact, when parents are assured that their children will survive, they choose to have fewer of them. As girls are educated and contraception becomes available, birthrates tumble — just as they did in the West. Indian women now average just 2.4 births, Indonesian women 2.5, and Mexican women just 2.2.”

(Nicholas Kristoff, “The Best News You Don’t Know,” *The New York Times*, September 22, 2016.)

Wow! Did you know all that? I did not. In spite of humanity’s many mistakes, greed, and endless war, God is still at work through governments, individuals, non-profits, churches, and other faith communities, and we are making progress toward ending poverty and easing human suffering worldwide. Praise God!

Third, the story of the rich man and Lazarus can help us in this sanctuary (rich people that we are) not to miss out on the lives we have the chance to live.

Elaine Prevallet asks, “And have you ever wondered *how it happens* that just seeing or imagining a picture of someone in pain can spark an automatic resonance of pain with you? Neurologists have found what they call *mirror neurons* in the brain. We actually feel, or mirror in our own body, the pain of others. Unless we block it out, that pain can spark within us an instinctive cue, a felt impulse to *do* something, to heal, assuage, to remedy. We are even compensated internally by a good feeling of approval when we respond with compassionate action!” (Elaine M. Prevallet, S.L. “Reaching Toward Kinship,” *Weavings*, XXXI, 4, 39.)

We’re hard-wired for compassion and love, aren’t we? But the rich man in the story didn’t see that. He missed out on the opportunity to care for poor Lazarus. Maybe that’s why the rich man was in pain. He missed the chance to respond in compassion to his brother, a fellow child of God. The opportunity was gone and the chasm too wide.

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But we're not going to miss that chance, are we? We're not missing that chance. Several times every month, I write Deacons' Fund checks that this congregation has paid for, to help people in need pay rent, utility bills, medical assistance, funeral assistance, and so on. Thousands of dollars every year, in addition to the tens of thousands of dollars every year we give for mission in this community and the world. We're not missing this opportunity to help our brothers and sisters.

Every month Guilford Park is down at Hot Dish and Hope feeding the homeless and hungry and sometimes singing to them. Every year our youth and adults travel to do mission. Our Guilford Park Guys program reaches out to at-risk boys (some of them have even gone to college). And right now we are thinking about new ways to help needy people in our community, especially our children and youth. Every day our members are formed by the good news of Jesus Christ into more loving and compassionate and wise people who are instruments of God's love. Every day.

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I told you that 40 years ago Evel Knievel was not able to jump across the Snake River. His chute deployed too early; it put the brakes on his work too soon, and the chasm was too wide.

But the funny thing is that this year, on September 16, stuntman Eddie Braun attempted the jump again as a tribute to Knievel. Braun's chute did not deploy too early and put the brakes on too soon. And the chasm wasn't too wide. He jumped the chasm.

The chasm between the rich and the poor is not too wide for us, is it? After all, we love our poor brothers and sisters, children of God. And it is our privilege and joy to work together to end their poverty wherever it may be. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal