

Luke 16:19-31 (NRSV)

"There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. 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 is 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.' He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house-- for I have five brothers--that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.' Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.' He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.' "

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

This past week I had my first visit to a Pain Management Center. Now, a "Pain Management Center" was a new idea to me. Even the words seemed so modern, so bureaucratic, that I didn't quite know what to expect. I imagined that I was going to meet with a pain manager. I was intrigued by the notion of what a pain

manager might be or do. I'd certainly experienced managers that were a pain, or ones that gave me a pain in the neck or elsewhere. But, as I say, something about this idea of a pain manager was intriguing to me. Such a modern, bloodless, antiseptic idea. A pain manager.

Now, don't misunderstand me. I'm very glad to have the medications that keep my pain under control. I also know that many of you and your family members and friends suffer from chronic pain and without these kinds of medications the quality of our lives would suffer greatly. So, what was it about the idea of Pain Management that sounded so strange to me?

As a mental experiment, I imagined that as I sat waiting in the lobby of the Pain Management Center the rich man from today's Gospel came in and sat down next to me. Even though the rich man is not named in the Gospel, tradition names him "Dives," which is Latin for wealthy. "Dives," I said, "what brings you here?"

He said, "You just read the Gospel lesson, I'm in torment. The heat, the flames, I'm in Hades and I'm in agony." I said, "Well, why do you suppose that is, that you're in torment in Hades." "I don't know," he said. "I was a good man, God blessed me with wealth. I was a pillar of the community, an elder in the synagogue. I don't know what I did wrong." "Dives," I said, "do you remember the poor man that was outside your gate?"

"Funny you mention that – I just saw him sitting next to Father Abraham. When I was alive I never noticed him. I found out later that he used to sit outside my gate and beg for scraps. They tell me that the dogs used to come by and torment him, but you know, I never noticed him at all. Well, when I saw him sitting up there, I asked Father Abraham to tell him to bring me some water, but he wouldn't do it. I asked Father Abraham to send

word to my brothers so that they wouldn't wind up like me and Father Abraham wouldn't do that, either. He said there was a vast chasm between me and the rest of the world now and no one could get across, not even to give a message."

I said, "Well, how did you get to this Pain Management Center?" With that, he gave me a surprised look, and then vanished. Where he went, I don't know. I guess he was right about the unbridgeable chasm. And so ended my imaginary conversation with Dives, the rich man.

Now, as I think back on this imaginary conversation, it seems clear that Dives never really did get the message. Even while he is in torment in Hades, he still thinks he's in charge, that he can order poor old Lazarus to bring him some water. You see, Dives always thought he was in charge. He had the good clothes, dressed in purple and fine linen. He had feasts every day, more than he could eat. It never occurred to him that anything could be different. So when the change came, he wasn't ready, he couldn't imagine being on the bottom rather than the top.

A lot of people look at this reading and read a very graphic, terrifying picture of what hell must be like. If you want to think about this as a story of Dives being tormented in Hell for his sins, if that is helpful for you, then go ahead. For me, what is interesting is whether the chasm between Lazarus and Dives that had come into existence after their deaths was there when they were both alive. At any time, Dives could have stopped while he was walking out his gate and looked, just looked to see a person there, starving and in pain. But he didn't. So, maybe there was a chasm after all, a chasm of social distance, of managed pain and managed perception. Dives could certainly see Lazarus when he wanted something from him, in Hades. But on earth, he was blind as a bat to this man who lay outside his gate.

Why is it that we have trouble seeing other people's pain? One reason, frankly, is that we don't like to think seriously about pain, either our own or anyone else's. Pain is embarrassing. It's an admission of weakness, something about you that's not perfect. And more than that, there's the suspicion that it's your own fault, that you're being punished for something, being taught a lesson or something like that. Today's Gospel story can easily be read in that way, Dives is suffering because he sinned in his life.

But that doesn't explain why Lazarus suffered outside the rich man's gate. Was he being punished? Jesus doesn't even hint at that, though much popular thought then and now would say that he must be suffering God's wrathful judgment. How often we are tempted to say the same thing, even today. It's his own fault, he brought it on himself, it serves him right.

This leads to a funny ambivalence that we have about pain – I noticed it when I met with the pain manager. He gave me a long lecture that I couldn't share my medications (or sell them, presumably), that if I lost them he wouldn't replace them, if I misused them, he'd drop me as a client. The presumption was that I intended to abuse these medications, even though he knew I was a pastor. I guess the Jerry Falwell story has gotten around.

I look out at this congregation and know that pain has been a central feature of nearly all of our lives at one time or another, and maybe it is right now. Nonetheless, we don't like to admit it, we don't like to talk about it, we're ashamed that we hurt inside.

The WISC group just got through with an interesting book by Dr. Leslie Parrott. The book's title is "You Matter More Than You Think." In it she says something that seems important in the context of this reading – that she sees the pain she has experienced in life as a blessing, as a gift. This stopped me in my tracks for a second, but she goes on, "pain is the grinding stone that shapes us

to love...It takes the sharp edges of our personalities and slowly smooths them into a person who can be tender with another person's wounds." This seems to me to be a much healthier attitude toward the pain we experience in our lives.

Pain is the great equalizer. Pain reminds us, if we let it, that we are all the same, really. My pain makes me a brother to you in your pain, because it is something that ties us together as humans. The Samaritan of a few weeks ago understood this when he bound the wounds of the man who was attacked by robbers. No matter how different they were in other respects, the Samaritan understood that the man was his neighbor. Lazarus **was** literally Dives' neighbor – he lived right outside the gate – but Dives couldn't see him.

If we manage our pain so well that we can't share it, or see the pain of others, or if we can't recognize their pain as fundamentally the same as our own, we have lost something very important about being human. We have lost the cord that binds us together, and then there really is an unbridgeable chasm between us. Because their pain is just as urgent as yours or mine is, just as important, just as frightening. In this, we are all the same, and that is what Dives never really did understand.

But isn't it interesting that even though the parable ends with a note of deep pessimism – Father Abraham says "neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead" – nonetheless that is exactly what happens! The man who gives us this parable does indeed rise from the dead. So **are** we convinced?

On November 17th, the In Crowd, our high school group, will be going to the District to participate in a walkathon to raise money and consciousness regarding the homeless, and I'm hoping to be able to go with them – ironically, if the pain in my back will let me. I'm so proud of this wonderful group, they're so full of

curiosity and energy. But most importantly, they want to see, see for themselves the people who live outside the gate. The people the rich man couldn't see until it was too late. Who are the people outside your gate? Can you see them? In so many ways, and especially in their pain, they're very much like you.

Amen.