

### **“The Great Chasm”**

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In 1543 there was this climactic event, right before the death of Nicholas Copernicus. Nicolaus was a wonderful Polish guy (and I try to come up with as many of those stories as I can find.) [Laughter] He was a brilliant astronomer and was so excited because he realized that he could change the way the entire universe was perceived.

He realized that the universe did not move around the sun. That we, as the inhabitants, were not the center of our own universe; rather in our solar system everything revolved around the sun. There were other solar systems revolving around the sun. He was so excited, because he - as a person of faith - went to the church and explained the truth: how God ordered creation, and, much to his surprise and chagrin, he realized that not only was the church not interested, they attacked his integrity.

They told the world that he was wrong and that he was a sinner - that he was Satan. Even those words were used to describe him. By this time he was in the last period of his life. He didn't have anything left to fight with. All of the other astronomers who read this had their “ah ha” moment and realized that he was right, but were left mute in their own fear and their own lack of courage, and the church suppressed that truth.

Change is difficult. We don't want to face it. We don't want to have to deal with it. And, change demands first that people admit that they can be wrong and there are other ways of looking at the world view. Sometimes it's nearly impossible to understand that.

That is what happened with the rich man [from Pastor Scott's Bible reading]. He had a world view that he was sure he was right, that God had blessed him with his wealth, and that if somebody were poor like this man, who was so desperately poor, full of sores, without food, and the dog is looking at him through the fence, that God must have rejected him. At first glance you can hardly blame the rich man; because isn't that exactly what Job's friends said to Job? It's biblical.

Yet, here is Jesus, once again, turning everything upside down. Jesus is saying, “No, you didn't respond properly. You didn't respond faithfully. You didn't see him.” The rich man stopped because he didn't understand. Even when he was in Hades with the fire lapping around him, looking up at Father Abraham - and Lazarus was sitting up in Heaven - he still didn't get it. His [the rich man's] world view was so entrenched that he couldn't change his mind over anything, to the extent that he said - without using his name; without addressing him personally - he looked at Abraham, not Lazarus, and said, “Will you get that guy to come down here, and dip his finger and serve me?” Even in hell he couldn't figure out that he was lower.

It was so hard, in that world view, to understand the financial means was not the definition of who he was and how his status was found. It was devastating to him. The only comforting, faithful point in that rich man's life was when he said, “Hey. OK. If I'm stuck here, at least have compassion on my five brothers.” But his compassion was about his own

family. He still didn't address Lazarus in the least. That should be a warning from Jesus to all of the people of faith in the world. What do we do with the poor?

Now, if I were in a congregation full of people who were full of sores, who had no money – starving – after the service we would go down and break open the food cabinet downstairs, that the wealthy church had provided from their food pantry to our poor little church. They would be sitting there on that Sunday morning, not offended by this passage, but going, “Yay! Maybe there is hope for me.”

But, when you have everything you need like we do, this passage is frightening. It scares me to my core. Am I doing enough? What more could I be doing and how could I change the way I think? Because, the rich man did nothing wrong, really, I mean it wasn't like he put that poor man in the circumstances he was in. It wasn't like he was some politician that made it so that the poor had no opportunity to receive wealth. He didn't feed him.

The problem was he [the rich man] didn't *see* him [Lazarus] and that was enough for the rich man to be cast into Hades. Our responsibility is to change our world view enough that we see those who the world ignores, and that is not easy.

I brought this up and went through it with my Wednesday night lectionary class. (They are always very helpful.) One of the most meaningful things that was said was, “I find this passage difficult in the 21<sup>st</sup> century because, when I see someone on the road and they have a sign out, I try very hard not to be judgmental, but I do wonder, “OK. If I give them \$5 bucks, is it going for alcohol? Is it going for drugs? What do I do? Can't they find their way somewhere else? There are places available.”

Then I had somebody in the group say - it reminds me of what Lisa Anderson said one time: They keep a bag of canned goods in the car. Well, this person in the class said, “We keep McDonald's gift certificates [in the car], because that way we know they are actually going to get a meal. I thought, “Boy, am I dense. I could have been doing this all the way along.” At least then we know they are getting a meal. Because, on the side of the road you don't always have time to say, “Gee, I don't have time to stop what I'm doing, going from here to there, and take you to get a meal.” Frankly, in this day and age, it's probably not safe to get them in your car. (I did that one time in my church in Indiana. Three hours later I'm still trying to get the guy out of the car.) [Laughter.] But you hand them a gift certificate and they can go - because there is a McDonald's on just about every corner in the world - get some food.

We make sure there are places like CROSS Ministries, and places like Family Promise that respond to the poor, that we support as well. There are places like the shelter where we provide meals, the money that comes from God's Garden, where you go. All the things that we do here are ways of responding and educationally saying to the young and old alike, “We see you.”

I have heard a lot of people say, “Well, I'm spiritual, but I'm not religious,” and they try to live out their spirituality alone. That doesn't mean that God doesn't love them, or that they don't have a place in Heaven, but it means what they are able to do is so limited. It is limited by that one individual's view point. It's limited by their amount of resources. They are limited by how many hours they have in a day.

That's why God wants us to - or one of the reasons God wants us to - be involved in a church. Because you put 1,100 resources together in a room and you can do so much more.

You all have changed my world view so much in the last five and a half years. The way I see the world is different because of the class I attend on Wednesday night with the group that I am a part of; visiting with the staff, going through different ideas of plans and goals. Being a part of the different areas in the life of this church, where we get together and have the ability to change each other's world views - making it larger - seeing more people. And, when you take the small amount of dollars in each one of our pockets that we could use to buy a few McDonald's gift cards, that we can hand out to somebody on the street, or we can write our little check out to one of the ministries that we support. What we do together is so much greater. Without this church, Family Promise would not be able to do their ministry, because seven days a week homeless families stay together - because they are here in this church - and you are less worried about whether there is a little bit of damage or there is someone smoking on the corner than the fact that we have seen them. They are a family and we are helping them to help themselves.

We can only do that when 1,100 people are together. One thousand one hundred separate people in separate homes would not be able to do that. CROSS Ministries passed out thousands of back packs this past month in a line going a block and a half long. That was only possible because of you and other churches [combining] together to support and teach so that others might see.

That is our mission. That is our ministry: to see where others are not able, to change a world view one step at a time, so there will not be any one left in need because they were not seen, so that all of our world views change - all of our hearts open - so that we are not just looking up in our spirituality, but we are looking out at our religion of people gathered together, not just loving ourselves, but all of God's children - from the wealthiest to the ones with the worst sores. So that we can shoo the dogs away, lift them up, give them dignity and respect, and show them that we see them and, even more importantly, that we love them.

That is what we do here. That's why we are not embarrassed to talk about stewardship, why we aren't shy about saying, "Come join us on Sunday morning. Come with us on Wednesday night," or, "Come to the shelter with us. We are doing a meal this week," so that all people have a world view large enough and a heart wide enough to change lives.

Thank you for what you do, and thank you for being part of this family, because we can do so much together and so little apart. Amen.