



**St. Anne's Episcopal Parish**  
**Church Circle • Annapolis, MD • 21401**

**Parish Offices & Education Building**  
**Location at 199 Duke of Gloucester St.**  
**Annapolis, MD 21401**

**Phone : 410-267-9333**  
**Fax 410-280-3181**  
**[www.stannes-annapolis.org](http://www.stannes-annapolis.org)**

---

Amy Richter  
Proper 21 C: 1 Tim 6: 6-19; Luke 16:19-31  
St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Annapolis, MD  
September 26, 2010

What do you think heaven is?

A man told this story of his experience just before his father died. The man and his sister were taking care of their father who was in the last stages of cancer, the man staying with their bed-ridden father during the day and his sister staying with their father through the night.

It had been a hard day. The man and his father had not always gotten along well, and on this particular day his father was especially irritable and giving him a hard time. The man was impatient, waiting for his sister to come for the night shift. He had his coat and shoes on so he could leave as quickly as possible when she arrived. But he heard his father call to him from the other room. He went in, and his father asked, "What do you think happens to us after this life?"

A big question. A serious question. The man didn't have many words, but he thought he could show his father his answer. He climbed into the bed and lay down beside his father. He asked him, "Dad, do you love me?"

"You know I love you," his father said.

The man touched his own chest and then touched his father's, right above his heart. The man asked, "How much of our ability to love do you think we use during our lives? Ten percent?"

"Fifteen," said his father.

"Okay," said the man. "In heaven," he said, touching his own chest and then his father's, "100 percent."

During the night the man got a call from his sister, telling him his father had died, quite peacefully. But before he died, he made a gesture she didn't understand. Just before he died, he looked at her, and he touched his chest – his heart – and then reached up and touched hers.

In heaven, 100 percent: true connectedness, true love, right relationship, no chasms between us.

We were made for relationship. We were made to be in right relationship with God and one another, 100 percent. But we don't live that way now. We always have a relationship with something else, something that takes up part of that heart space so we don't use all 100 percent for loving God and loving our neighbor. Sometimes that something is money or seeking our own comfort over the needs of others.

In a passage from the First Letter to Timothy, St. Paul exhorts Christians not to get too close to the uncertainty of riches, money, or material wealth; but instead, he says, draw close to “God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.” If you live in right relationship with God, it will show in this way, says Paul: doing good, being rich in good works, being generous and ready to share. And living this way he says, will allow us to “take hold of the life that really is life.” Not the appearance of life – what this world trumpets as the good life – material comforts – but the life that really is life, the abundance that comes from living heart to heart, 100 percent now.

The story Jesus tells in today's Gospel could be an elaboration on this reading. It is easy to talk about righteousness in general, as a concept, in the abstract. It is quite another matter to deal with it in the particular.

“Poverty” doesn't lie outside the rich man's gate. A poor, starving human being does. He is covered with sores, willing to eat scraps; a man, with a name: Lazarus.

The rich man, although his sumptuous lifestyle would have him deny it, has a need too. The rich man needs to serve Lazarus as a brother. Together they could help each other experience “the life that really is life.” But during this life, the rich man does not notice Lazarus, much less care for

him. It's as if Lazarus doesn't exist for him. A great chasm separates the two men, a chasm of the rich man's making.

The scene shifts to heaven. All is reversed. Lazarus is content. The rich man is in torment. The rich man longs for even a drop of water to cool the tongue that had tasted so many pleasing foods during his life.

And yet, the rich man still does not care about Lazarus. In his torment, he wants to use Lazarus as a servant. "Send him to put a drop of water to cool my tongue," he says.

"No," says Abraham. The chasm between you that you dug during your life has become impassable. The gulf by which you were comforted in life has become un-crossable.

The truth of this parable is that the rich man needs Lazarus as much as Lazarus needs the rich man. The independence that riches seem to bring is only an illusion. The rich man thinks he can afford not to see Lazarus lying outside his gate. The rich man lives under the illusion that we are islands, contrary to John Donne's wisdom, entire of ourselves. We are separated by gulfs, and we can only build so many bridges. The rich man lives with the illusion that we are intrinsically separate beings, our own possessions, and that to be responsible only for ourselves is enough.

Like Cain in Genesis, the rich man shrugs, "Am I my brother's keeper?" assuming it is a rhetorical question, not dreaming that the answer may be "yes." Yes, you are responsible, and your choices – to see, to notice, to serve, to love, or not – matter.

Perhaps for the rich man the gulf between himself and the beggar with his sores brings him a sense of safety. Perhaps he feels there is little he can do, little difference he can make. Perhaps he sees the gulf as a necessary evil. Perhaps the rich man is afraid of really being seen – of being revealed as inept or powerless or empty despite his material success.

Jesus' parable points to something better for us, something better and more real – the reality that we were created not to be alone, but to be loved; not to be users of one another, but to be partners in the world. We were created not to dig chasms and let gulfs separate us, but to build bridges.

So, who are we in this parable? We are not Lazarus, although we may be longing for something. We are not the rich man, although we may have more than we need of material possessions. We are the five brothers, the brothers and sisters of the rich man, still living, whom the rich man wishes to warn, to save from the torment of being on one side of a chasm; the torment of being separated from God; the torment of being able to envision only using people, not loving them, and ignoring the poor, not serving them. We are the five brothers, in danger of waiting for some spectacular sign from God before we will take the message seriously.

No, says Abraham, you have all the sign you need.

And we do. We have the Word, we have the prophets, we even have a man risen from the dead.

All of us have someone sitting by our gates – someone who gives us the opportunity to fulfill the promises of our baptismal covenant, promises to seek and serve Christ in all people, to respect the dignity of every person. We have a choice: to build bridges or dig chasms. And we can choose to use 100 percent of our capacity to love now and not wait for heaven.

What do you choose?