

“Beyond Brokenness”

2 Corinthians 5:17-20; Luke 16:19-31 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – September 21, 2025
Reconciliation Special Offering Observance #1

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might acknowledge our deep need for your reconciling love. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Reconciliation Ministry offered us a two-part theme this year, building on this summer's General Assembly theme, “Beyond,” which came from Ephesians 3:20-21. But the Reconciliation theme is giving a nod back to the founding of the ministry, leaning into those verses we just heard from Second Corinthians, which gave our racial justice ministry its name. Using that image of dismissing the old and rejoicing in the new, that great calling to be ambassadors of reconciliation on Christ's behalf, this year's theme calls us “Beyond Brokenness” into “Building Beloved Community.”

So because we have these two parts, and two Sundays, and such an interesting, rich gospel story to explore, I thought we would do this over two weeks. So, of course, since the very beginning is a very good place to start, we're going to look at “Beyond Brokenness” today, and we'll save the beloved community for next Sunday.

The first thing that strikes me about the phrase “Beyond Brokenness” is that it could mean two opposite things. Given what comes after those words in the whole theme, I assume they're intending to say that we're going past brokenness, to what's next, the place where it gets better. But this is also a phrase that could mean, not what's

after brokenness, but just really, really broken. When something is beyond broken, it's utterly destroyed, irreparably damaged, unfixable.

And in some ways, that's an accurate description of the situation in this story Jesus tells us in Luke 16. Certainly, the situation on earth, when both the rich man and Lazarus were still living was very, very broken. No one should be starving while others feast. Later in the story, we learn that the rich man knows Lazarus' name, so he clearly knew he was out there injured and starving. Yet he continued to do nothing to help him till the day he died. Talk about beyond broken. The rich man's heart was damaged, in the sense that it didn't function the way a human heart should, moving him to sympathy and action in the face of fellow human's suffering.

It's that bit about the dogs really gets me. It brings to mind another story about Jesus when he is reminded that the dogs get to eat the crumbs that fall from the table. Those are the very crumbs Lazarus wishes he could eat to keep himself from dying, but he doesn't get to. Instead, they are consumed by the dogs, who then come and lick his open sores. You might even see this as way of literally rubbing salt in his wounds. Indeed, this situation is beyond broken.

But that's on earth. We might expect things to be broken on earth, right? But what about after death? The drama of this story is that brokenness that existed on earth seems to be intact after death, in some interesting ways. The tables have turned, but in some ways, the rich man still doesn't get it. I can imagine that having to see

Lazarus in comfort is part of his torment, but he still tries to assume a position of power over Lazarus. Why would he think he can insist that Abraham send Lazarus down to assuage his thirst, or demand that he be sent to the rich man's brothers to warn them? Why would he think he gets to boss Lazarus around, when he's rotting in the depths of Hades? Even as he's ruining the consequences of his selfish behavior, he continues being that way, as though he had learned nothing. Dying certainly didn't fix him.

Now I don't pretend to know anything about the metaphysics of the afterlife, but if Father Abraham is to be believed, there is another irreparable brokenness in this situation. He refuses the rich man's pleas, explaining that they're both getting their just deserts. But then he also points out a structural excuse: apparently there is a "great chasm" between heaven and Hades, such that Lazarus couldn't get down there to bring him any relief anyway. I feel like if God wanted to bridge a great chasm, God could do that, but for the purposes of this story, Jesus wanted us to imagine that the rich man's demands were impossible. I wonder what would have happened to that chasm if the rich man had actually understood the error of his ways and repented and pled for mercy in a way that showed true regret? Could it have been a chasm of his own making? Was it his own sense of entitlement and self-centeredness that kept heaven from bringing him relief? We can't know, but we can imagine.

Is it perhaps that same kind of self-constructed chasm that Abraham is assuming would keep the rich man's brothers from learning from his bad example, even if Lazarus were to visit them from beyond the grave? Is the wealth inequality that shapes our world so very intractable that even an angel from heaven couldn't pry it away from us?

This whole situation sounds like a better description of our current situation than the reconciled world Paul is describing in Second Corinthians. "Everything old has passed away," he wrote, but it hasn't yet, has it? Those chasms of wealth inequality are still shaping everything around us. The scourge of racism that has deformed all our attempts at civilization continues to bedevil us. These verses about reconciliation skip to the end, when it's been done, but if it was in the story of Christ that God was doing the reconciling, we know that it will not be without suffering. There will be brokenness, for brokenness is central to the story of Christ.

When wounds are covered over, sometimes it's because they're healing. But sometimes it just means they're festering, digging in deep, only to erupt later causing bigger problems. That is how the history of racism has often worked in our society. We learn a little bit and decide it's solved; but since we haven't truly let the wisdom of God's compassion cleanse the depths of our souls of prejudice and fear, we falter and fail when the next test arises. Sometimes it's important that we just stay broken open for a while, so that the light of God's love can truly bring healing.

Ambassadors are often considered jobs passed out as reward to political favorites. But the positions where actual skills are required aren't usually given to big donors with no preparation. True diplomats have training. They learn the ways of diplomacy, the importance of going slow, showing respect, and seeking compromise. As ambassadors for Christ, we have to learn the ways of reconciliation too. We can't be like the rich man, just regretful because of our diminished circumstances. Rather, we must truly repent of our entitlement and greed, our prejudice and sense of superiority.

Those of us who have grown up swimming in the white supremacy of our dominant culture have a lot to unlearn. If we want to be able to see clearly the brokenness of our society, so that we can truly move beyond it, we have to be willing to engage with the utter destruction of the past. We need to understand the legacies not just of the native genocide that formed the country and the slavery often called our original sin, but of segregation and redlining, and why municipal pools got closed down, and why certain hairstyles aren't considered professional, and what racial profiling looks like and how it impacts the families in our neighborhoods. We often prefer to turn our gaze away from the brokenness of our society, but God is calling us to be ambassadors of reconciliation. We cannot reconcile what we will not look at. If we want to grow beyond brokenness, we need to recognize how beyond broken things really are. Then we can meet Christ where all things are being made new! Hallelujah and Amen!