

The chasm between them is fixed, Jesus says. The distance between Dives, as the rich man is sometimes called, and Lazarus, is deep, and wide and as slick as oil.

There is no easy way to get from here to there.

Once, perhaps, as easy to cross as a crack in the sidewalk, or a brook in a meadow; inch by inch, grain of sand by grain of sand, all those acts and failure to act have, over time, produced a separation that is not only deep and wide, it is fixed.

An impossibility. There won't be angels, or Lazarus coming to call anytime soon to set Dives free from his misery.

Dives is stuck, on the wrong side of God's judgement.

And the way he got there? Well, it could happen to any one of us.

Maybe it began the first day he noticed Lazarus outside his gate.

That day, Lazarus came hungry, starving in fact, begging for just a simple meal. And maybe even offering to do some small chore in return.

A simple bargain, no skin off Dives teeth. But Dives, he is a busy man, and he knows that there are poor people in the world, it is a given.

One meal won't make all that much difference, so he walks right by Lazarus as he heads out to visit his stock broker.

He doesn't even look Lazarus in the eye.

Well, that day, Lazarus moves on to the house of another person, who feeds him.

Maybe he gets a job picking grapes for a day or two during harvest season and sometimes he can even buy some food. He is OK for now.

But then he gets sick, he can't get work, and soon he finds himself, once again, begging at the door of Dives.

Now, Dives can't help but notice, when he walks out his gate that morning, that Lazarus is there again,

and that this time, Lazarus is in worse shape than before.

Just a little tiny twinge of something uncomfortable pulls at Dives gut.

Maybe he feels ever so slightly the nag of a guilty conscience.

But that doesn't feel good, so Dives does what he always does

when something doesn't feel good;

pulling himself together, he ignores the pain and soldiers on, sailing right past Lazarus, refusing to look him in the eye.

Already, Lazarus has begun to be less of a person, a fellow human being,
in the eyes of Dives. He's become just another impossible problem to solve.

But Dives knows how to handle tough feelings. He knows how to soldier on.
What he doesn't know is that he has begun to build the chasm.

Lazarus, too sick to move on to another doorway,
haunts the doorway of Dives for days to come.

With each day, as Lazarus grows sicker and sicker, Dives' heart grows harder and harder,
his eyes averted and his mind refusing to see what is right in front of him.

At this point, Dives is more invested in his own emotional comfort
than he is interested in the welfare of someone who is clearly suffering
right before his very own eyes. He can't feel any guilt, let alone compassion.

Lazarus has been edged out of Dives' sight by a blindness of the heart that,
day by day, Dives has chosen.

Chosen because-it was too uncomfortable to see Lazarus?

That too see that much raw suffering just made him feel scared and powerless?
He couldn't cure the man, for God's sake!

Did he turn away from all that suffering because he couldn't bear to see it?

Did he turn away because it was too much trouble to help—he didn't have time
for other people's suffering in his life?

Maybe next year, once the stock market improved? maybe then he could afford
to be a nicer person?

Did he turn away because it made him feel helpless—he had no idea how to help—and
admitting that made him feel stupid and incompetent.

Better to not think about it at all.

Pick a reason: we don't know why Dives chose to ignore the suffering
that was right before him.

Maybe all we need to know is that we might do it too.

We have done it too. I have done it and you have done it.

Turned away from suffering because it made us feel bad
to think about it. Feel scared, or powerless or stupid.

Maybe all we need to know is that every time we do that,

we lose a little bit of our heart.

We become a little less of who God created us to be.

Our hearts, made of flesh and meant to feel, hardened into stone,
speck of sand by tiny speck of sand,
each time we look away from what pains us to see.

Pebble by pebble, Dives built the chasm in his heart.

A chasm not just between himself and Lazarus, not just between himself and God, but between himself and his own God given humanity.

The chasm, built not by one huge act of indifference, but by many, many smaller decisions

to choose comfort over the hard work of loving the world as God loves it.

To choose to look away from suffering,
rather than trusting that God's gift of a heart of flesh is a *good* thing.

As I was reading the scriptures assigned for this week,
it was hard for me to not think about the chasms

that have begun to be fixed in our own day and time.

Suffering, which if it continues to be ignored, might well be our own downfall.

Choices, that we are making today, as individuals, and political parties, as a nation, that may bring us, like Dives, to ruin.

There are the refugees, all over the globe, who simply seek safety for their children.

Who simply want their children to live.

Whether it is from bombs, or drug lords they would save them,

parents who will pay dearly to assure that their children live to grow up.

We have a choice: we can choose to see clearly the choices that they have been dealt,
and imagine how we ourselves would seek life for our children.

We can give them shelter, yes even at the risk that a few might turn radical.

Or we can throw up our hands, finding all sorts of reasons to look away.

The refugees, and the fear of refugees, becoming its own fixed chasm,
separating us from others, and from God.

There is the chasm that is our dramatically, rapidly changing climate that has already contributed, and will continue to contribute to famine and subsequent social unrest,

social unrest and subsequent war, and the preying opportunism of human traffickers as millions are displaced from their homes.

It might be that global warming will only cost *us* the loss of landscapes—

beaches and forests and coral reefs--that we love.

It could also be that global warming will cost each of us our hearts of flesh.

It could be that we are building a chasm between not only

us and the begging strangers at our door,

but that we are building a chasm between us and the God who made this lovely planet.

And this week, once again, terrible signs of the terrible racial divide in our country.

How are we helping to build that chasm?

How are we contributing to the destruction of our own hearts of flesh, and the hearts of flesh of others? How have we built a chasm that is fixed, that divides us not only from our black sisters and brothers, but from the freedom and democracy that we all cherish?

By turning blindly away from understanding the complexities of living with black skin, because it makes us uncomfortable to think about.

Because it makes us feel powerless, or scared or stupid or angry and we don't like to feel that tug in our gut.

Chasms aren't a thing of the past, not just a story in the Bible.

Chasms are a tendency in human nature,

but they aren't any tendency God wants to see us act on.

God's dream for us is that we don't build chasms.

So, it's time to wind this sermon down. But, first, a spoiler alert.

This being the gospel, Jesus doesn't lead us into these hard truths about ourselves without also giving us a hand to help us out of the abyss.

Though Jesus describes the chasm that Dives has built as fixed,

and that even the resurrected Christ won't change that,

he doesn't say that repairing the chasm can't be done.

So, maybe there is hope.

Maybe there is hope for Dives and maybe there is even hope for us.

And maybe that hope needs to be no larger than a tiny little mustard seed.

But enough for now—that's next week's sermon.