

## **PART TWO BIBLE STUDY**

### **THE CHASM**

#### **LUKE 16:19-31**

##### **Foreword: How is this parable about race?**

Much like the rich man who never actually noticed Lazarus begging outside his front gate every day, some people – of all races – by choice, by neglect or by isolation, remain blind to the inequities that are part of both structural and internalized racism. Lazarus suffered throughout his earthly life and the rich man feasted throughout his. Jesus chose this sharp contrast to teach about justice. By extension, the parable speaks eloquently about race as it portrays both the numbness of privilege and the poverty of ignorance.

In this study, the unnamed rich man represents White people who have enjoyed racial privilege throughout the history of this nation. By means of this parable, we can help people identify the historical chasm as well as the current realities of race in the United States.

The point of the study is simple: Although we human beings may be blind to injustice – either by choice or isolation – God is not. God is not blind to it whether it is inequity to one or inequity to a group or race. The lifting up of the oppressed and the bringing down of the mighty form a common scriptural theme. As we see conditions grow worse in our own public squares, it is obvious that our society is not working toward God's will on earth as it is in heaven.

Please note that neither the rich man nor the poor man is depicted as being either moral or immoral, good or bad. According to author John Dominic Crossan in his book, *The Power of Parable: How Fiction by Jesus Became Fiction about Jesus*, "They are simply described economically rather than appraised morally."

Crossan also points out that Jesus' choice to name the poor man but not the rich man

was provocative. He explains that in the tradition of parable, either both characters in the story would be named or neither would be. Jesus names only one: the poor man Lazarus. Crossan suggests that Jesus' first listeners would have caught this little twist of the tradition.

### **How to use this guide**

Leader's Notes and Leader's Prompts appear throughout the Leader Guide. **Notes**, which appear in this font, are to help you facilitate the study smoothly. Prompts, which appear in this font, are for you to speak aloud to your group.

There is no participants' section to be printed out, as this study is entirely experiential. The leader is the only one who needs a printed copy of the study.

### **Preparation**

This study is for women who are aware of the historical racial context of this nation in some depth. That awareness will prevent frustration or worse among participants.

You, the leader, need not be an expert, but you must know enough about the racialized history of our nation and our church to understand that being an expert is not necessary – if we remain receptive and open.

Many participants will have at least some knowledge of the Civil Rights Movement. They also tend to bear good will toward people of other races. However, they may lack proficiency in discussing racial injustice.

Before leading this study, please read at least one or two of the books on our bibliography that directly address our enculturation into the racial framing of our nation and society. *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, *When Affirmative Action was White* and *Birth of a White Nation* provide solid groundwork. A good grounding will keep you from unintentionally supporting or, worse, repeating well-intentioned but unhelpful rhetoric.

### ***Make Tent Cards***

Standard office-supply tent cards are too small to be legible from any distance, so it is recommended that you use light-colored file folders, which are much larger.

To make file folders into tent cards, first fold the open, tabbed edges toward the center crease, about two inches from the outer edge. Use a thin metal ruler or other straight edge to make the folds into sharp creases.

Once the folds are made, slightly overlap the two flaps and stand the tent card up. You might wish to use a bit of tape to hold the flaps in place. You may unfold the tent cards and pack the folders flat for transport.

Clearly print the same text on both sides of each tent card.

### ***Tent Card Texts***

The text on each card consists of a heading and some illustrations. The examples shown here were current in late 2014; you will (sadly) have more current illustrations to use. Please feel free to adapt these illustrations to fit your group's context.

#### **Media**

Portrayal of victims, portrayal of criminals, hyping of individual behavior

#### **Criminal Justice**

Prison population mostly people of color, sentencing inequities, inequities in prosecution

#### **Law Enforcement**

Males of color 21% more likely to die at hands of police, stop-and-frisk policing, events in Ferguson, Staten Island, and more...

#### **Economics**

Higher unemployment for people of color, higher proportion of people of color in poverty, higher interest rates for people of color

### **Social Services**

Food insecurity higher among people of color, less resources for public education in neighborhoods with people of color, food deserts

### **Health Care**

Higher infant mortality for people of color, limited health-care resources, medical research not including people of color

### **Education**

Teaching of Euro-centric history, dismantling of affirmative action, lack of people of color in textbooks

### **Business**

Marketing ignores people of color, people of color often followed in stores, advertising featuring people of color or mixed-race families draws criticism

### ***A capsule description of the study***

The first time the parable is read, the group is whole. For the second reading of the text, you will have divided your group into two parts. Half the group will identify with Lazarus and the other half with the rich man.

The third person in the parable, Father Abraham, is not “assigned.” He may simply be referred to as you ask the group what Father Abraham may think.

Or Father Abraham need not come up at all! The greatest “aha!” moments seem to come for participants as they speak as either Lazarus or the rich man—and we always want to go for the greatest “aha!” that we can.

After the first reading of the parable, place the prepared tent cards on a flat surface (perhaps a long table) between those who represent Lazarus and those who represent the rich man.

Features of structural racism are highlighted on the tent cards. In view of these characteristics, the metaphor of the rich man as privileged White people and Lazarus as people of color becomes more vivid.

Once the cards have been placed, ask the two groups to read what is on them. Tell them that the cards are the same on both sides, so participants need not cross the chasm. This helps the experience feel as genuine as possible, since the chasm in the parable is impossible to cross.

Describe the text on the tent cards as manifestations of the racial divide as it is experienced today. Be prepared to clarify. After a couple of minutes, ask participants to sit quietly and hear the parable of the chasm once again.

Once you have read the parable again, ask everyone to sit quietly for at least 60 seconds before continuing.

Do not be surprised if people struggle with that full minute of silence! As leader, you may pray silently for all present.

Then ask the participants how they feel – as the rich man, as Lazarus. Remind them to say things like, “I felt really hopeless begging outside your gate,” or “I was angry that you wouldn’t go beg somewhere else, Lazarus.”

We want to take participants from left brain to right brain and back again, as this is the most effective way to learn something new. Keep them in their “roles” by deflecting any responses that would to analysis.

What is likely to be named is sorrow, perhaps even hopelessness. Allow participants to name whatever they **feel** as they are in their roles. Respect the sorrow and acknowledge the hopelessness, but do not encourage it. Facilitate with great compassion.

Close the study by reading Ecclesiastes 4:1.

## **The Chasm**

### ***Introduction***

In the story of Lazarus and the rich man, we are confronted with a stark separation between Lazarus's reward and the rich man's judgment. We will explore the challenge of this parable mindful of the stark racial chasm that has existed in our nation as well as within the church for centuries.

We will hear this biblical text from Luke now. I ask you to put yourself into the story by picturing the people and places, and hearing the sounds. Allow yourself to feel the story. Imagine the feelings of Lazarus, the rich man and even Father Abraham as you listen to this parable.

#### **Luke 16:19-31**

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."

Allow at least 20 seconds of silence at the conclusion of your reading before asking for responses. You might start the sharing with your own brief comment: "Every time I hear this parable, I feel . . . "You might invite participants' responses with something like: "What was that like for you?"

Allow some time for participants to share brief responses, and then continue.

This chasm is not a comfortable separation. It is also uncomfortable to consider the historical chasm of racial privilege that has existed in this nation from its beginning.

Women of the ELCA decided almost 20 years ago that we would have these conversations about race.

We have these conversations with compassionate dedication to uncovering what we must learn so that we can be advocates for God's racial justice. Now, we are going to hear this parable again.



This time, we will take the two primary roles of the parable more personally, because some of you will be Lazarus and others of you will be the rich man.

Divide the participants into two groups of equal size and move the groups to opposite sides of the room, leaving a gap between the group. A long table may serve as a divider. Ask one group to listen to the parable as the rich man and the other group as Lazarus.

Remind participants that they are not to retreat into the comfortable role of outside observer or analyst, but to feel the emotions of the character they have been assigned.

Now set out the tent cards in a single line, end to end, halfway between the two groups. (If you have enough time, you might read the parable one more time to the two groups before placing the cards.)

This time, we are giving the chasm clear and specific features in the language of today. You see, the chasm is real. It was historically established and it continues mostly unchecked in our world and in our lives. We seldom think of these systemic things when we think of being diverse or multicultural, or when we seek to do outreach.

Society makes it easier for White people to forget the chasm exists. People of color are much more aware of its reality. It confronts people of color daily.

### **Naming the Chasm**

Now ask participants to read the text on the cards. Remind them that they are the same on both sides, so participants are to stay on their own side. Just as in the parable, no one can cross from one side of the chasm to the other.

Allow some time for all participants to read the cards. You may answer any clarifying questions in these or similar words:

These are structural entities that have great bearing on our individual quality of life.

We may not always think of these things when we think about race relations.

We can see that to grow, we must acknowledge and respond to this chasm.

It is no easy task to look at these.

Once satisfied that everyone has at least seen each of the tent cards once, ask people to return to their places. Remind participants that they are each playing a role that places them either on the privileged or the oppressed side of the tent cards.

You might say:

Remember, I am asking you to *become* the rich man (indicating that group) and I am asking you (indicating that group) to *become* Lazarus. Feel and see the story as Lazarus. Feel and see the story as the rich man. Now, we will begin again.

### **ReMix Paraphrase**

#### **Luke 16:19-31 (vv. 19, 20 paraphrased)**

There was a rich man who was dressed in privilege, who had a map to all the wonders of the world, the tools to fix any problem or tear down any obstacle and a passport that gained him entrance to work and pay and advancement. He not only had money but an ability to borrow from friends and family and financial institutions, because he was always thought to be trustworthy.

And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus clothed in suspicion, whose skin color marked him as a criminal, who worried that his unarmed children would be killed in the streets or sentenced to prison, who couldn't rely on an inheritance from family, since they were not allowed to take advantage of financial opportunities in the past and were denied fair financing in the present.

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."

### **Conversation about the parable**

I invite you to speak to the people on the other side of the room as the rich man and as Lazarus. Remember, the chasm separates you from each other.

As facilitator, you may have to encourage response from the collective Lazarus or rich man. Remind participants to speak to each other in character. At times there may be contradictory feelings or comments from within either group. Let those contradictions play themselves out or simply let them stand as they are spoken.

More than one Lazarus or rich man might move into analysis mode. This could simply be the desire to practice analyses, but it could also be an attempt to jump ahead of or out of the discomfort of being either Lazarus or the rich man. Coach participants to leave analysis aside and return to soul reaction to their role in the parable.

Any comment made to you should be re-directed toward the other group. For example, if a participant turns to you and says, "I understand now I was blind to Lazarus," you would respond, "Tell Lazarus, 'I was blind to you.'" Step back as participants engage one another.

### **Optional processing questions**

You may not need to use these questions, depending on how well the participants' exchange takes off. Allow sufficient time for the depth and richness of the exchange to develop as people get into their roles. Stay with the conversation until you sense a readiness of the group to move on. Then either ask the first question listed below or move on to the general discussion questions below.

During your time on earth, what did you experience? How did you feel about it?

Spend sufficient time with this first question before moving on.

What do you have to say to each other about your treatment of each other?

What do you have to say to each other about how you saw each other?

What do you have to say to each other about how you were kept apart?

Then you both died. What do you have to say to each other now?

### **General discussion questions**

This discussion is not “in character.”

Note that within the parable, the unnamed rich man never speaks directly to Lazarus. He speaks only to the one in power, Father Abraham..

What meaning does this parable have for your congregation, organization, or the church at large?

How is this a parable of how people see each other and treat each other in today’s society? How about within Women of the ELCA? Or the ELCA?

### **If Father Abraham speaks**

In some instances, calling participants to consider Father Abraham can take the conversation deeper. Father Abraham would be brought up after most of the feelings are expressed by the two groups portraying Lazarus and the rich man.

Two general questions that can help Father Abraham pull the threads together or

introduce some analysis might be:

What did Father Abraham notice about the conversation between the rich man and Lazarus here today?

What might he want to say to Lazarus? To the rich man?

### ***Background information for the leader***

It may be worthwhile to share some background information. Please use what fits.

Lazarus, the poor man, a sick beggar without comfort in his life, is called by name, while the rich man remains nameless.

Lazarus remains silent throughout the story so we have no information about what his thoughts or feelings. Lazarus may have had compassion on the rich man, but there was nothing he could do.

Angels come to Lazarus after he dies and carry him away to be with Abraham.

The rich man died and was buried. No angels come. From his place in the flames of Hades, he sees Lazarus with Abraham and commands Abraham, "Tell Lazarus to bring me water." He is used to being in control and directs Abraham to do his bidding as well as ordering Lazarus to help him. He still sees Lazarus as a servant, unequal to himself.

There is a chasm that cannot be crossed. That is part of the harsh reality of this text, which we do not often explore. Perhaps it is too uncomfortable and scary for many of us in this rich nation? After all, globally, we are the rich man.

Perhaps we are more often the rich ones rather than the poor ones, even in our churches, and this text is hard for that reason.

The rich man seems to care about others when he asks for his brothers to be warned about the situation they are in. He wasn't thinking only of himself.

Abraham refers the rich man's brothers to Moses and the prophets. The rich man insists that "if someone goes to them from the dead, they will listen and repent." Abraham responds, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced by someone who rose from the dead."

### **Conclusion**

We each have the opportunity to see Lazarus. We can extend our hospitality and our lives to those who are unlike us, those who would otherwise be invisible to us. But Father Abraham said that even "if someone were to rise from the dead," people would not listen.

Have we heard the message any better than the rich man did? Are we paying attention to the resurrected life in which we are to partner with God in bringing about justice and peace on earth?

It is all right to feel a bit uncomfortable with the lessons of this parable. We can find comfort in doing justice or we can continue to fear the stranger. We can find comfort in working for racial equity or we can be suspicious and afraid of those who are different from ourselves. We can live our lives within the confines that society has given us or we can build bridges of understanding. We can distract ourselves from taking part in creating racial justice with the drama of whatever we are already busy doing.

Consider the words of Ecclesiastes 4:1: "Again I saw all the oppressions that are practiced under the sun. Look, the tears of

the oppressed—with no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power—with no one to comfort them.”

Close with prayer.