

Bridges Loom Large  
 Luke 16:19-31\*  
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May the God.....  
 Good. Morning.

Bridges loom large for me.  
 I have always found them  
 both thrilling and frightening.

For many who grew up here in Michigan the Mackinaw Bridge might be a structure that echoes in your mind's eye when you envision a bridge.

The aquamarine vastness of Lake Michigan, intersecting with the royal blue of Lake Huron, the sun setting amidst the suspension cables engraved on some of our license plates offers an iconic Michigan image. Not to mention the urban legends of small cars being blown over the side when the Gales of November come early. (The Michigan Department of Transportation goes to great lengths to explain that although two cars have gone off the bridge, neither was the actual result of the high winds that were blasting through the straights at that moment. Which is sort of comforting...) For the last 30 years the Mackinaw Bridge has figured in almost all of my summer vacation plans.

But for me, the iconic bridge of my childhood is the shorter and younger cousin of the Mackinaw, the Verrazzano bridge, another suspension masterpiece going from the North end of Staten Island to the West end of Long Island offering an amazing view of New York City if you're not driving it is the iconic bridge of my childhood.

I remember my parents,  
 New Yorkers to the core,  
 proudly saying,  
 as we would cross it on our way to visit all of our relatives that  
 it's even longer than the Golden Gate.  
 (I didn't know  
 what the Golden Gate was  
 but I knew I should be impressed.)  
 It was always  
 a much anticipated portion  
 of my childhood road trips  
 as we drove from Virginia to Long Island.

There was a thrill of being so high—  
 suspended on such thin wires

with the water far below  
 and the car, vibrating back and forth  
 on the grating of the deck.  
 There was my father  
 tensely holding onto the wheel of the car, instructing us in the back seat that we would no longer  
 be having any conversation—  
 and my mother  
 somewhat, but not totally, playfully covering her eyes.

Who cannot go  
 over a bridge  
 without internalizing  
 the thrill and fear of it all?

For years, (actually I still do it) I would roll down the windows of the car  
 —just in case--if we went off— so I could swim out.

I have come to the conclusion  
 that bridges are Holy objects,  
 physically and metaphorically,  
     — sacred thoroughfares  
 that lead us from one world to another  
 if we dare venture across.  
 It is bridges that we are called to cross.  
 They are frequently,  
 the only way for us to move beyond our zones  
     of privilege, power and comfort.

So---  
 There were two men,  
 about the same age,  
 from the same town,  
 apparently even from the same street  
 their paths converge for a time  
 and then divide for all eternity.  
 Lazarus and the rich man.

The rich man unnamed,  
     unknown now, but then with fine purple clothes  
                             and rich Egyptian linen underclothes.  
 A man who dines richly,  
     lives sumptuously.  
 A man who commands the respect of many  
     —and the attention of all.  
 A rich man surrounded by  
     gates and fences,

—elegant and genteel—  
 rolling past the one, lying beside his driveway  
 each day and noticing Lazarus  
 as much as he might see a shrub.

The one lying beside the drive is Lazarus  
 —the only character  
 in all the parables who actually has a name.  
 Lazarus—  
     poor, with sores oozing pus,  
 —the hungry man who longs to fill his stomach  
 with scraps  
 from the rich man’s table.  
 Lazarus all alone  
     tended to only by dogs.

To be clear,  
 this is not the same Lazarus,  
 who came back from the dead,  
 called forth by Jesus from the tomb,  
 but given the poverty in which this Lazarus existed  
 he may as well  
 have been buried alive.

Lazarus is the first to die of the pair  
 and as biblical scholar Walter Bruggeman says,  
 “It was the only time in his life  
     that he’d had been first at anything.”  
 Carried away by angels at his last breath  
     —placed in the arms of Abraham  
 —Lazarus, the poor man from the streets-- is finally at peace.

The rich man dies not too long after.  
 Buried he wakes  
 and from the fires of hades  
 he looks up to heaven above  
 and sees a man vaguely familiar--  
 who is it?  
 Then it comes to him  
 this is the poor wretch  
 who squatted at his gate.

The rich man calls out from his torment.  
 “Father Abraham—  
     have pity on me  
     —send Lazarus down

with a cool drop of water  
that he may wet my tongue  
and ease my suffering.”

Even from hell the rich one  
bids people to do his will.

But Abraham  
still comforting Lazarus—  
states the reality of the situation  
that seems to elude the rich man.

“In your life you received good things,  
in his life Lazarus received bad—  
now he is comforted and you are suffering  
—and here’s the kicker—  
there is a chasm—  
a divide—a grand canyon—  
a snake river size channel  
—a chasm that is fixed  
with no way to cross.

Says Abraham,  
“You cannot join us up here  
and we cannot aid you down there.  
It’s a divide  
as long as your driveway and as tall as your fences.

In death the chasms are fixed  
—before  
when they were both alive  
there were narrow passages,  
lithe, to be sure little bridges  
from one world to the next  
available for those  
with courage and vision to venture across  
—the cultural, racial, class and economic divides—  
but when we die—  
so says the parable the—  
the bridges are lost—  
the canyons, uncrossable—  
glaring crevasses leaving  
even the best Alpinist at a loss.  
One permanently separated from the other.

The key to crossing the crevasse

—bridging the great divide  
 between the insides of the rich man's walls  
 and the outsides of the poor man's sores—  
 — is to look beyond our walls  
 to venture forth on those  
 small, tremulous gateways  
 stretching between one world to another  
 while we are **still breathing**.

What are the bridges *that span the fixed chasms of inequity and inequality in our in our state?*  
*I'm thinking of the food pantries in Southfield, Ann Arbor, Mt Clemens and Royal Oak, to name  
 a few. I'm thinking about the blessing boxes outside our congregations in Lansing, Lincoln Park  
 and Wyandotte. I'm thinking of the lunches at our Cathedral and Crossroads Ministry in  
 Detroit, or breakfasts in Bound Together in Pontiac. The vegetable gardens at St. Michael's in  
 Lansing, Church of the Messiah, Detroit and St. Paul's Romeo.*

*To be sure, these aren't perfect bridges, they wobble, get tossed about by the winds of the world,  
 but they are places, moments of gracious interaction and care, where people from different  
 places,  
 different races,  
 different classes,  
 and religious beliefs  
 venture forth to address basic human needs:  
 for food, hope, and community.*

*How many more might we create?  
 Moments when people are packing grocery bags,  
 chopping vegetables  
 and sitting and listening to stories  
 from the margins of our communities, small actions, tiny footsteps that begin to cross the  
 communal divides of our state and our country.  
 These endeavors are sacred events.  
 holy moments of time  
 when bit by bit we span  
 the ever-growing chasms,  
 in our communities  
 between people in need and people of means.*

The chasms in this city of Detroit are deep,  
 where 57 per cent of our children in this city  
 live below the poverty line.  
 The chasms in our state, a bountiful state with an abundance of farms and yet of every person  
 you meet in our state, 1 in 9 are hungry. And 1 in 7 of our children are hungry.  
*Bridges to cross the chasms, bridges to span the gulf  
 that divides the people in need from people of means.  
 Can I do more? Can we do more? Lazarus is at our gates.*

I am convinced that poverty and despair  
will cease to exist  
when unadorned statistics  
become friends with stories,  
and neighbors with names.

I am convinced  
that those chasms can be crossed  
that they are not yet fixed—  
for bridges---bridges loom large for me.

And for you—when was the last time you were on a bridge?  
When was the last time you ventured onto a sacred thoroughfare from one world to the next?  
Might it be time for us to venture forth again---while you are **still breathing?**

Amen.